NOTABLE DHAMMA TEACHERS

Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007)

Senior teachers guiding the IMS three-month retreat — vipassanā and mettā across a long retreat

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CHAPTER 1

Morning Instructions Myoshin #1

Myoshin Kelley · 1h19

> *In this opening instruction session of the three-month retreat, Myoshin Kelley introduces a foundational approach to vipassanā practice centered on profound simplicity. She emphasizes that insight meditation is fundamentally about seeing things as they are in their nature, yet practitioners often complicate this by being selective about what experiences they want to acknowledge. The core teaching here is radical acceptance: knowing anger, aversion, and unpleasant sensations with the same quality of awareness as peace and calm.*
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> *Kelley offers three essential guidelines for practice: relax, recognize awareness, and stay interested. She explains that knowing happens spontaneously—we don't need to create or fabricate what is known, only recognize it. This receptive quality of "settling back" and receiving experience as it unfolds contrasts with the subtle striving many practitioners unconsciously bring to meditation. She addresses the tension between focused attention on a single object like the breath and open awareness of all experience, suggesting that both approaches have their place depending on what supports mindfulness in any given moment.*
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> *The instruction extends beyond formal sitting to include walking meditation and all daily activities, emphasizing continuity of awareness throughout the four postures the Buddha described. Through a guided body scan and walking exercise, practitioners learn to know experience directly and immediately. Kelley encourages an easeful steadiness rather than demanding or judgmental approaches, noting that moment-to-moment mindfulness builds the concentration and stability needed for wisdom to unfold naturally.*

I wanted to begin the instruction period this morning by emphasizing a couple of qualities that I think are very helpful to our practice.

As a teacher, I know it's my great aspiration to help you practice in a way that doesn't perpetuate suffering. Sometimes the very way we approach our practice seems to be loaded and filled with ideas that actually work against the practice. In my own journey, it has felt like there's been a continual uncovering of these ideas—ideas I don't even realize are there. But what I've come to see is that practice is really very simple.

This was evident in Joseph's instruction last night: to sit and know that you are sitting. It's so simple on one level to just know what our experience is. Vipassana, or insight meditation, is a practice to see things as they are in their nature. And yet many times we're so selective about what we want to see. We want to see peace, calm, tran-

quility. We don't want to see anger, aversion. We don't want unpleasant physical sensations. But it's to see it all and to know it in its nature. If we can let our practice be very simple, it brings a great ease.

Our job is just to recognize what the mind is knowing. And this knowing happens spontaneously. As we are sitting here right now, there can be many experiences that are known. We may know body sensations. There may be a knowing of sound—sounds outside, sounds in the room, sound of my voice. There may be mind states that are known. Maybe there's restlessness, agitation, or calmness, peace. At times there may be thoughts that are occurring. Just in pointing to any of these experiences, we can see that there is a simplicity in just knowing this. We don't need to create what is known. We don't need to fabricate it in any way. It simply needs to be recognized.

So we can practice from a place of recognizing what is being known. And yes, this will change a lot. It can change very rapidly at times. The steadiness comes from just paying attention to this process—what the mind is recognizing. The practice is simple in recognizing our experience, whatever it is. The complication, of course, comes in that we have habits of distraction, habits of not paying attention, habits of attachment, aversion. We also need to recognize this. But we can see if we can practice in a way that allows the unfolding, allows the Dhamma to reveal itself. We don't have to create the Dhamma. It's here right now.

With this simplicity, it's also helpful to relax, to see where the tension comes in, to see where the wanting happens, and see if we can relax. There's a sense of settling back. The quality of receptivity helps to strengthen this relaxation—a sense of receiving experience. Receiving the breath, receiving sounds, receiving thoughts. It's not that we want to perpetuate the thoughts, but to know that this is what is occurring in our experience in this moment.

With this simplicity, this quality of relaxation, we also need to have interest in this process. What is occurring? What is happening? What is being known? We probably know from our own experience that if someone is speaking and we have no interest, it's really hard to connect, to pay attention. But if this interest is there, it brings a steadiness, a willingness to look, to see. And this interest is a non-interfering interest. What is the mind recognizing? What is being known? It's like turning a light on in the mind—just to see, to know, to understand. And of course this is nothing we can force.

The practice is really about relaxing into the unfolding, turning up as best we can in each moment without being hypervigilant. Finding the ease of just recognizing this experience.

So in the sitting meditation, finding a stable posture where the body feels relaxed and at ease as much as possible, where it feels supported—supported by the earth—where there's an uprightness that supports wakefulness. And to sit and know that you're sitting. Knowing our experience, whatever it may be.

When sensations in the body are prevalent, it's a way to know the nature of the body. To know pressure, heat, tightness, coolness. Knowing this body directly and immediately as it is. Maybe sensations of breath. Sounds. Knowing what the mind is recognizing.

Noticing if there's a quality of relaxation here, the sense of settling back and receiving experience as it is, or if there's a sense of wanting, wanting to create. Seeing if we can settle back and receive. Receiving this experience as it is.

When the mind starts to wander or many thoughts arise, we can just recognize that thinking is occurring. Recognizing whatever is being known, and doing this as often as possible.

There may be times when the thoughts seem endless and have such a strong pull, or there's some sense of confusion, where it might be helpful to be with a stable object for a period of time—such as the breath, the sitting posture, or hearing—returning the awareness, the attention to these experiences. And after a period of time, once again, practicing with the simplicity of recognizing what is being known.

There's no one object that is better than any other object. It's just the recognition of what is being known. Moment by moment, recognizing sounds, thoughts, mind states—whatever is present, as it is.

Three simple guidelines: relax, recognize awareness, and stay interested. Recognizing what is being known in this moment.

Noticing if there's any sense of struggle happening. Can you relax with this and know the experience as it is? This moment, without needing to create or modify. Remembering that at times it may be helpful to let the mind rest with one aspect of experience—with hearing, with the body sensations, sitting, with the breath.

So our practice is to train the mind to be present. And this practice is not limited to our sitting meditation. The continuity that we need to help concentration deepen, to help the mind stabilize, is a training that comes moment to moment. With each moment that there is this recognition of what is being known, when we start to put moments together, there comes a great power and stability in the mind and we can recognize what is. But it relies upon us doing this moment by moment.

If we have one moment of mindfulness and seven hours later have another moment of mindfulness, mindfulness is not so strong. But if we really work with just setting in our minds this intention to know, to be present for what's occurring, and we just keep returning to this—so we get lost many times, but we just stay steady in the recognition when we have the opportunity—if we can work with that steadiness in an easeful way, our practice can really unfold quite naturally.

If we start to have demands about it, it can get quite painful. If we get discouraged and judge, it also becomes very painful. So this morning I'd just like to encourage you to see if you can set this intention to recognize what the mind is knowing in any moment, whether you're sitting, walking, standing, or lying down. The Buddha talked about practicing in all four postures. We practice from the time we wake up to the time we fall asleep—but in an easeful way, steady. It's the steadiness that really helps us.

So in a few moments I'm going to give some instruction for the walking meditation. But first, to see if there are any questions. Tomorrow the instructions will continue and we will also begin the interview process. What we're giving in the hall is very general instruction. Everyone may need tweaking here and there, which you can get in guidance from your teachers.

Each of you will be working with two teachers, alternating between them throughout the retreat. Tomorrow, half of the group will be seen, and the next day, the other half. So if when the lists go up your name isn't there, don't worry—you should be on the next day's list. During those interviews, you will receive more individual guidance.

Right now, if I've said something that totally confuses you and you feel like you just won't make it through the day without getting a question answered, please feel free to ask. But just know that more specific guidance will be coming your way.

Someone asks about the shift in instruction from focusing on the breath to opening up to everything.

There are many different ways to practice, and at times different emphasis is given to different aspects of practice. There can be times when it is very helpful to let the mind rest with the breath. If we sit down and find that we are lost in thought for long periods of time, or there's such a sense of instability and restlessness—which can be worked with, but may be feeling overwhelming for some reason—it may be helpful to let the mind steady on the breath, to really allow that to be the place the attention returns to. Other experiences arise, and we just come back to the breath. That can be a very helpful way of practice, and at times it's been given strong emphasis.

What I think we're trying to encourage here—what I've seen happen in my own teaching—is that some people will set that up as *that's* what needs to happen in practice, *that's* what the mind should be doing. Then you sit down and have all kinds of experiences. There may be recognition of those experiences, but you have the idea that the mind should be on the breath—and then you're a failure, you're no good. But really, the training can be to simply be mindful in any moment and to know what is occurring.

Hopefully within the instructions we give, there will be a place for both. There will be a place where, when it's really helpful, we allow the mind to connect and sustain attention with one particular aspect of experience. And also, we don't set up a hierarchy of that being better than some other experience. This allows us to open to the totality of what the mind is aware of.

Within that, I think we are emphasizing a lot more openness than we maybe have in past retreats here. For myself, that comes from what I'm finding helpful—that's my offering of what I'm finding helpful. It's not to diminish any other way of practice. That's where, in saying you'll receive individual instruction, some of you may find it works better to really work with the breath, sound, or body in a slightly more directed way. It's always an interesting challenge to sit with a large group of people and offer instruction that's helpful to everyone.

One of the things I know is that when I really shifted into a more simple way of practice, I discovered how much subtle striving I had. It was suddenly evident—wow, I really wanted to sustain on an object. I had an underlying idea that if my practice was going well, I'd be really calm, and objects would be known in perfect ease. That didn't allow for a lot of what was actually happening. And then suddenly there was just this sense of, "Oh, yeah, anger is happening, and this is what can be known." It just felt like I was able to include experience on another level.

Another question comes about experiencing allergies and itchiness, and wanting guidance about when to just be with it or when it's okay to move.

I'd like to say that the underlay here is not a right or a wrong, but to be mindful. Whether you're sitting with itchiness, irritation, whether there is the need to move, to scratch your nose—let mindfulness be the base, not the activity, not the experience. So there's complete freedom, in a sense.

And yet, in our lives, we have such habits that as soon as we hit discomfort, we move, we change. It's just amazing to see how deeply ingrained that is.

If we're first responding from that habit, but we're mindful of it, we begin to see it. And that might become instructive in itself. This is a way that wisdom unfolds within the practice. We see, "Oh, it's just this knee-jerk reaction to something that's unpleasant." Okay.

Having interest in this whole situation can be really helpful. As I said in the beginning of the sitting, it's not an interfering interest, but just like opening the mind to this experience. What's happening here? Not with an idea about how one should be or what one should do with it, but just, "Oh, what's happening here?"

Then it's the opportunity to know the nature of the body—that there's tingling, there might be warmth, there might be various sensations that come with that. Can that just be known as it is? And then maybe we see that there's reaction in the mind, there's agitation, there's not liking. Be aware of that. That's okay. This is what's happening. This is your practice. Just remembering: you don't need to get rid of this to practice. You practice with this.

We will find, if mindfulness is present, that sometimes wisdom comes in and something needs to change. But it's seen with wisdom rather than being that knee-jerk reaction. Maybe we become aware that there is a scent that is triggering it, and perhaps if we sat somewhere else, we wouldn't have that scent. That's just an example. But when we pay attention, more information comes, understanding deepens, and a wise response can happen.

I encourage you to let it be there. It's okay. On one level, just be with both body and mind as it's occurring. As reaction happens, see if that can be let go of or let be, relaxing with this. And then at times we may, on the relative level, need to do something different.

I'd like to move on to the walking instruction. To begin this, I'd like for us to stand up and do a short exercise together. If you'd like to stand up—which is probably a helpful stretch at this point—and then find a place where you'll be able to take a couple of steps in front of you without bumping into anyone or anything.

Standing with your feet about shoulder width apart. Standing is a posture in itself, so mindfulness of standing. We begin right there, once again, with simply knowing this experience. Noticing if there's any tension, any holding, and just seeing if there can be a relaxing with.

As you're standing, bring the awareness to the top of your head. Just notice if any sensations are present, or if it's just a sense of this part of the body.

Let the attention come down to your forehead and the area around your eyes. See what's present, what the mind recognizes. Maybe tightness, moisture. Relaxing with.

Bring the attention to the area of the cheekbones and the jaw. Just noticing, receiving.

In the mouth—sensations in the mouth. Tingling, moisture, vibrations.

Then bring the attention to the back of the head, down into the neck, and the shoulders. Notice if there's a difference in the sensations of each shoulder.

Bring the attention down into the upper arm, the elbows, the lower arms, the wrists, the hands.

The fingertips. And bringing the attention up into the chest, the front of the chest, whatever sensations are present, the back of the chest, down into the abdomen. The pelvic area. The hips. Down into the upper thigh, the knees, the lower legs, the ankles, and the feet.

With the basis of walking, knowing that you are walking, beginning to lift your right heel and know the experience, pushing the foot forward and dropping it down. If you need to open your eyes to keep your balance, this is fine. Slowly lifting the left heel. Knowing the experience, moving forward, dropping it. And bringing your right foot to be beside your left. Standing, and knowing that you are standing. Knowing the experience of this body, this mind, as it is. Simple and direct in its immediacy.

Taking a few steps to find your cushion again, and once again sitting down, continuing the practice as you do so.

So, walking meditation. Letting it be simple. But I like to do this exercise because it helps us get in touch with knowing the experience of the body within the body. Just that sense of allowing what transpires to arise, be known, and disappear.

When we're doing walking meditation, first we want to really notice if we have an attitude about it. I know for myself, when I first was doing meditation, sitting was the real practice, and walking was what you did when you couldn't sit anymore. Not helpful. So really working with continuity, even from the time you get up from your cushion, letting it all be practice.

With walking meditation, although it's simply to walk and know that you are walking, it can be helpful to find somewhere where you can walk back and forth, just because our habits are so strong. I've seen this in my own mind on retreat where walking comes along, and oh, well, we may need to go to the toilet—and that's very real, not to

discourage you from that. But, you know, go walking, then have a cup of tea. Oh, go and check out what's happening in the garden. Oh, I think there's something in my room I need. We can find ways of walking all over, fueled by needing distraction.

And so just to help simplify and to work—so often in our lives when we're walking, we're going somewhere and the mind is ahead of itself. We want to have that sense of receiving experience, that sense of receptivity, settling back, to take one step and know that walking is occurring. That sense of receiving, settling back.

Sometimes, for some people, it's helpful to slow down. I like to say around speed, it's really to walk at the speed that best supports mindfulness. And that will change in the course of a day. There's nothing holy about going really, really slow. And if the mind is really agitated, it might not be so helpful. It's really to see what helps to connect and know experience.

Just to walk and know you're walking. And within that experience of walking, it will be very much like sitting. Sometimes we may be aware of the legs moving, the soles of the feet, the sense of the body moving through space. Sometimes there will be a thought—to recognize thinking is occurring. Sometimes there may be sounds—to recognize hearing is occurring. So again, it's very similar to the sitting practice, but it's done walking, done in movement, done actively with activity in the body. Yet it's that same basis: simply knowing what is occurring.

And again, at times it may be helpful to let the mind stabilize on one aspect of experience, where for a period of time we're being aware of the movement of the legs, or the movement of the whole body, or of hearing. What helps connect and know this experience? And then, if there's a sense of stability, one opens again to the totality of experience.

In walking, it's really helpful to be inclusive of seeing, because we will be seeing. If we're not seeing, we'll bump into walls and people. And yet, so often we don't recognize when seeing is occurring. It's just to notice. Seeing happens in the same way hearing happens.

We simply notice that hearing happened—the knowing of it occurred. In the same way, when our eyes are open, seeing happens. It's the recognition of this natural process. Sometimes seeing moves into looking, where there's an intention, a more active engagement, perhaps an interest in the specifics of what's being seen. We simply recognize that movement of mind.

We can be inclusive of all experience, and when it's helpful, we let attention rest with just one aspect. Really let this practice be a play that happens throughout the whole day. I'm talking now about walking, but it applies to eating, to our yogi jobs, to showering—it applies to everything we do. Just doing this moment by moment in an easeful way.

A question was asked about whether it's helpful to alternate systematically through seeing, hearing, moving, touching, or simply to open to everything.

This is something we have to pay attention to—the effects of how we practice and what's helpful for us individually. For some people at some times, it will be very helpful to systematically move through each sense door. If that's a way of practice you're familiar with, and it really helps you to connect, to know your experience, then that's fine—because it doesn't matter what your experience is, what matters is that you're aware of it.

However, if out of that systematic approach you find that rigidity or tightness develops in how you're practicing, then you might want to open up more to everything.

It's really important that we notice the effect of how we practice. We can't do that in a harsh or judgmental way. But it's like noticing that moving through seeing, hearing, moving, touching is helping to stabilize awareness—we see that, and yes, it's helpful. Then there might come a point where it's just not as helpful anymore, where that approach is bringing in a tightness. And then we let it go.

There are many, many tools of practice. For myself, it's been helpful to keep practice as simple as possible, and then bring in a tool only when it's needed. It's like digging a well—sometimes you hit different terrain, and things destabilize for a while. As a means of helping to stabilize, one brings in a skillful means. And then when stability returns, we can let the tool go.

CHAPTER 2

From Aspiration to Faith

Patricia Genoud-Feldman · 1h01

> *In this heartfelt talk from the 2007 three-month retreat at IMS, Patricia Genoud-Feldman explores the intimate relationship between aspiration and faith (saddhā) on the spiritual path. Drawing from her own transformative experiences—including a pivotal first retreat in Nepal under the fierce guidance of Sayadaw U Paṇḍita—she illustrates how meeting difficulty with openness can release deeper trust and freedom.*
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> *The talk examines different dimensions of faith: trust in the Dhamma, reliance on teachers, confidence in the saṅgha, and most essentially, faith in one's own capacity to awaken. Genoud-Feldman addresses how doubt and despair can arise during intensive practice, and how these hindrances, when met with awareness rather than resistance, become stepping stones to wisdom. She emphasizes that the literal meaning of saddhā—"to place one's heart upon"—captures the quality of surrender needed to move beyond habitual patterns into the unknown.*
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> *Weaving together the Buddha's story of encountering the four heavenly messengers with practical guidance for retreat practice, the talk offers encouragement for practitioners facing cycles of ease and difficulty. The teaching points toward a fundamental truth: everything arising in meditation is part of the purification process, and nothing we encounter is a mistake. By trusting awareness itself rather than trying to manipulate experience, we allow wisdom to emerge naturally, responding to the Buddha's invitation: "Ehipassiko—come and see for yourself."*

Yesterday morning we were all invited to express our aspiration for being here in just a few words. I imagine you remember this moment. It was very inspiring to hear all the different expressions of aspiration that arose in the room.

Each of us has come here because we have a sense of aspiration—one that may be very clear to some of us and not so clear to others. But somehow that is what brings us to a path, to really undertake a journey where we begin to understand the workings of the mind and the opening of the heart.

We may have expressed it in very different ways, and yet I had a very felt sense of a similar expression: that we all yearn to experience ourselves a little closer, that we wish to experience a life closer to one of peace, that we wish to feel more whole, or to know ourselves better. All these different expressions, in one way or another, reveal a truth—

and that truth is universal. It is a truth based on our own understanding, not on some belief that depends on outer conditions or anything outside of ourselves. And I think today you really sense the coming inward, truly emphasizing this closeness to yourself.

There is a story. A Zen master was invited to a great Catholic monastery to give instruction in Zen practice. He exhorted the monks to meditate and try to solve their koan, their Zen question, with great energy and zeal. He told them that if they could practice with full-hearted effort, true understanding would come to them.

One old monk raised his hand. "Master," he said, "our way of prayer is different than this. We have been meditating and praying in the simplest fashion without effort, waiting instead to be illuminated by the grace of God. In Zen, is there anything like this illuminating grace that comes to one uninvited?"

The Zen master looked back and laughed happily. "Well," he said, "in Zen, we believe that God has already done his share."

It is quite valuable to remember that we can relate to our aspiration during our stay here, to deeply know that this aspiration can change over the days, that it is not fixed in any way. As clarity and wisdom and understanding grow, there can be a change in the direction we have set for ourselves.

I remember that my initial aspiration when I began practice years ago was to end suffering. Just like the Buddha, I had a path where I was noticing suffering. Growing up in Africa, it was so palpable—everything around me was a manifestation of dukkha, of suffering, in one way or another. Since I was a very little girl, at a very young age, I remember setting this aspiration for myself: to end suffering, my own and that of the world. A great aspiration for a child.

When I began practice, it was during a month of retreat. As the days went by, I really had to acknowledge that not only was suffering not diminishing during the practice, during that month of retreat, but in reality it was increasing. As I was getting closer to myself, there was less distance. One day I questioned what had gone wrong. And I realized that absolutely nothing had gone wrong—quite the opposite. As I was meeting my suffering, a greater sense of freedom arose, and that released a sense of trust, enabling me to really allow the suffering to be the aspiration itself.

When we have this kind of understanding, suffering may be the proximate cause for greater faith. It releases our faith, our trust.

It is important that we don't fix a goal, whatever the duration of time we're spending here. The goal is not what it's about. We may accomplish some understanding, but it is not realistic if we place an aspiration where the goal is really to understand from the position of wanting to achieve something, rather than from the place of living the practice. Often that is what happens—there is such wanting that we miss the moment, and then the aspiration is lost.

So it is living the process, a very dynamic, endless opening to the truth of now, that will reveal the greatest understanding. What this means is that we move, we shift, from that position of knowing what we believe to perhaps not knowing. And in that space of not knowing, there is the possibility for wisdom to emerge.

What really manifests then is a greater sense of possibility. When there is a sense of trust that we tend toward something greater—greater than ourselves, perhaps. By that I don't mean something outer, in outer space. I mean something greater than what we think we're able to do, greater than what we think we're able to achieve. To not hold a belief in our capacity is exactly the end of limitation. Not holding any belief enables us to turn toward the mystery, toward the unknown.

In a way, we know very clearly that this is what is happening in the present moment. The thrust of the practice is just revealing this space, the truth of now, and how much we hide ourselves from this truth. The learning process is one of deepening this truth of the unknown.

It is an attitude of mind, of heart, that requires one quality—which you've probably guessed I'll be speaking about tonight—and that is the quality of faith, of trust, of confidence.

I remember when I began on this path, I started in the Tibetan tradition and gave myself a lot of time for practice.

I would go to Asia in the early 80s, following teachings from a Tibetan master who has since passed away. My teacher was Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, and every year he would give us teachings. It was very inspiring to receive teachings from him because he was definitely a wonderful, great master.

But one morning, just after four or five days of teaching, he suddenly told us that this would be the end of receiving the teachings that year because he was called by the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala. This was a master who was giving the Dzogchen teachings to the Dalai Lama. So the whole sense of purpose had suddenly vanished. It would be

like if all of us five teachers were to leave this hall in a few days saying, "Okay, you're on your own. Here it is." What would you think? It really requires such determination and a kind of true faith to continue the path. Do I really need to set up this form?

But what happened was extraordinary. That very same evening, my husband and I went back to the place where we were living, and there was a note from Joseph saying there was an extraordinary master from Burma who was there for a month and who was going to offer a retreat—Sayadaw U Pandita, whom you probably have heard of. There were still places on that retreat, and if we wished, we could join. This was my first meeting with Joseph.

I had only done a weekend of vipassana practice, so I had completely mixed feelings, being really linked to the Tibetan tradition and not really knowing what I was exposing myself to. And yet it turned out to be the most difficult retreat—in Nepal, the very first one-month meditation retreat. The conditions were absolutely awful. Everybody got sick because there was a lack of hygiene in the kitchen. I got very, very sick. There was a tremendous amount of noise. You don't know how lucky you are to have this setup.

And yet it really required such a leap of determination to remain stable, to have this sense of aspiration, of seeking the truth. In the first interview I had with Sayadaw U Pandita, he saw me a little bit shaky and asked, of course, "What are you doing here? What brings you from so far away?" I'll always remember this question. And I said, "I wish to end suffering in myself. This is really my deepest aspiration."

His reply was very direct, straightforward. This was a master who was not limited by wanting students to be comfortable, you could say. And yet his wake-up call was just so impressive that one would simply follow the way he had of guiding us. So his words to my deep wish, my deep yearning, were: "If you want to end your suffering, you must be willing to give everything away."

In my early twenties, I thought, "Whoa, I'm not quite ready for this." But then came the next part of the phrase: "You must be willing to die for the Dhamma." Of course this was an image he used, but it was a very powerful image for me. It meant nothing other than: don't indulge while you're here. This is such precious time. Don't indulge in the habitual tendencies of greed, hatred, and delusion.

Now, as teachers here in the West, we have a very different way of expressing ourselves to support your presence, to support your practice. We won't say you need to die for the Dhamma. Yet we do emphasize this need for commitment, for great renunciation, because this is the way that will enable us to really benefit from this time together. And it is precious time.

The wake-up call was so strong in that first retreat that it gave me the spark of faith to walk the path up to this day. And it can really be an endeavor—an endeavor to meet whatever it is that is showing up. What it really means is doing the best we can.

So what it meant, when I reflect back over the years, is that we call forth the qualities, the good qualities, the paramis that Joseph mentioned last night, to come to the surface. These qualities are present within us. It's not that they're not present, but instead of lingering in the negative forces, we really call forth those qualities that lie within us, that will give us support to trust the moment.

The qualities of wholesome desire to see the truth. Of strong determination, or yearning, to wish to wake up, to end the suffering. The sense of great energy that allows us to really make the effort to keep going, even when it's difficult. The quality of equanimity. Of loving-kindness, of opening that heart of kindness towards ourselves. Of patience, perseverance, and many other qualities that you'll hear about over the days.

All these different qualities, in a way, support our initial sense of faith. And then the need for faith simply arises naturally. As one of my teachers would always say, it's a question of really living the path—living the path in this moment rather than wanting to achieve a goal. Living this path means just being in this present moment. And so different kinds of faith will aspire and inspire us on the path.

The first of these, of course, is the faith and trust in the teachings, in the Dhamma itself. You might not know exactly what the Dhamma comprises, and of course, over the days here, we gain a greater sense of what it means, what it is leading towards. It's said that the Dhamma is good at the beginning, good at the middle, and good in the end. What is good is available to us. And so it's helpful if we can open our heart—maybe at first it will be something we approach with a blind faith. And yet, by the progression of meeting ourselves on the path, we'll ask ourselves the appropriate questions and really relate in a way that brings us closer to the truth. What Myoshin said this morning about interest, and Joseph too—that curiosity, that real investigation of heart and mind, to know just what is happening. So the faith in the Dhamma is definitely one upon which we can place our heart.

Another trust or faith is to place our trust in our own teachers. To take to heart the advice of a teacher is not always easy. I know that for myself I have often tried to justify through reasoning not to follow a teacher's advice, and I have had a sense of regret at times for losing time, losing energy, because all of the advice I have received really strongly emphasized wisdom and compassion towards myself. And so, of course, if there are ways that you feel something isn't helpful, then you can leave that on the side. But mostly, what prevents us from taking in advice that really is helpful towards seeing

the truth? So relying on the advice of our teachers really is a leap of faith. You'll get to know your teachers if you don't know them already. A sense of trust will also enable a confidence in being able to reveal the truth, to say just what is, rather than what we would like to be happening.

In this Nepal retreat, I remember having had such a hard time to relate, not knowing exactly what was asked of me. Even practicing very diligently, it seemed that it was never enough. There was a sense of real unworthiness that was coming up. And yet, such a learning in that moment of dread when I would have an interview—and yet being able to stay firm and just say what was happening. At times it did reveal an unsatisfactoriness in the response I was getting. And was it not the truth I needed to hear?

One day I was really living an anxiety attack, really a panic attack, because there was not much of a reference and not much of a support. We talk about a container here of real support, which I hope, in a way, gives you the sense of being able to trust that an opening is possible. So in a moment of panic attack, I totally lost it and ended up in the quarters of the Sayadaw at a totally inappropriate time—things that you don't want to do at night—rushing in in tears because I needed help, and I wasn't really noticing what was happening. No teacher assistant, no night contact, nothing of that kind, I can tell you.

And so the attendant, the monk who was at the door, seeing me rushing in said, "No, it's not a time for you to come in." But Sayadaw was not far away, and he called to me. He said, "No, let her in." And I was asked, "What is happening?" Of course, through my tears—I was crying more than I could express in words. And the only thing that was said to me is, "Good cry, please continue. This is the truth."

Well, you know, it's extraordinary because what it reveals is that one can rely on oneself. And that's exactly what gives us the greatest strength, the greatest determination of, okay, am I really alone in this path? We're not. Yet there are circumstances where you wonder. And luckily, I had the strength to be able to hear. Just, you know, good cry.

But the monk, seeing that I was still totally unsettled—he was also the translator—just added one phrase that changed everything. He said, "You have fear. Take the lap of the Buddha as a refuge. Just take the lap of the Buddha as a refuge."

Now you have to know that these are Sayadaws or monks, and of course there isn't the psychological or, in a way, cultural psychological way that we express and have an interchange. And so having faith in that Buddha, I thought, take the lap.

I went back, and of course it was very late at night. I went into the empty Dharma Hall, and there was a very big Buddha rupa, Buddha statue. Burma is filled with them. Thank goodness—this is really where you can get a sense of refuge.

It didn't occur to me right at first, but I just sat in the Dharma Hall alone, and it was amazing to notice the impact on my emotional state. To be able to really receive from that statue, from that rupa, the support that I needed—support that enabled me to open the heart and to say: what is happening is just okay.

Sometimes we need to take heart. This is a poem by Jennifer Edwards:

Take heart, but also take comfort, healing, rest, and love. Leave sorrow amongst the rocks and woods, who most of the time are far stronger, better able to handle such loads. Take courage, but also take honesty, courtesy, empathy, and patience. Leave doubt amidst the deep ocean waters; watch it sink there until you cannot cling to it any longer. Take faith, but leave with an open mind, an open hand, open arms. Take whatever you need to make it through. Leave what keeps you from going on. Tears only go so far. Fear only holds so long. Though your feet may bleed and your hands tremble, take deep compassion for your own suffering. Take deep compassion for the suffering of another, and journey on.

This is really the courage that is needed to reveal the opening of the heart and all the difficulties that lie deep in us all. But it's not pushing in any way. It's really allowing ourselves to be touched by what is arising and not hide away. This is the journey.

So faith holds an element of courage. Having a courageous heart gives us the strength. A state of reverence to the Buddha really allowed me to have reverence to my own essence. And that's exactly what is revealed. That Buddha nature, that essence that we are so deeply yearning to meet, is exactly what presents itself when we stop running away.

So we surrender to the truth in taking refuge—in the teachings, in the teacher, in the sangha, in the community, in all of those who walk the path with us. And most of all, the preciousness of having faith in our own capacity, our own ability, our own courage to walk this path towards awakening.

Faith causes steadfastness to emerge. There's definitely a greater sense of determination which comes forth when we understand that it's by opening that we heal. When we live on the surface, there's a natural closing down. And yet we acknowledge finally what is good for us, what is beneficial. And what is beneficial is sometimes to meet our fear, our doubt, our questioning—at the pace that we're able to.

It's said that faith or confidence overcomes doubt and fear. Of course, we'll be talking much more about the hindrances that come up for us all. They're also called the afflictive emotions. And it's true that they tend to color the present moment.

One of the biggest hindrances is doubt, when it's not seen for what it is. Because when doubt comes in—and it may be that you had some doubts today, not open questions but doubts, about what you're doing here, about the instructions, about the way to practice, about your own capacity, whatever the doubt was—when doubt is present, we often go into the thinking mind. We try to figure it out. We try not to let doubt just reveal itself; we try to be clever. How can I know better than just meeting doubt?

And at least it has been my experience that the more we think about it, the less we're able to see clearly. The thinking mind has such a capacity to spin and to not reveal true understanding. So it's confusing. And not only is it confusing, but it brings more pain. We get tied into the knots of the thinking mind.

So wisdom that is spoken of here is not coming from reasoning or intellectual knowledge, from trying to sort out. And we'll see that happening. We'll see this over and over again—that we'll use the thinking mind to try to solve our problems. And so we open to allow doubt to be known just as doubt. And again, it is this trust, this faith, to open to this momentary experience in this very moment that enables us to see what is, to see the reality and understand it.

What really is happening then is that instead of being at a distance with experience, we come really close to experience.

There's an existential understanding that doesn't come from doing anything. How much we try to do, thinking that by doing, by achieving, by doing the practice, we are really, in a way, hindering our own progress. And so the less interference, the less manipulation you can say, the greater is intuitive knowledge. It's exquisite at times to live this process of deepening the trust to just allow what is to be known. That's the capacity of the heart and mind to stay open, to trust, and to trust the unknown.

All the habits, all the tendencies of the mind to manipulate, to interfere, to want to do something instead of just receiving—this comes from wanting to run away from the unknown. It's scary. How can we live more willingly in that space of the unknown? Well, very easily. Already you have the secret. This morning we received the instruction of being receptive, really receptive, receiving sound, receiving experience. That is enabling us a sense of moving away from controlling, manipulating, from self-referencing, from "me and my meditation." Therefore, the process doesn't need as much as we

think. The path is quite simple. Awareness itself is what we trust in. Rather than trusting that we have to do something to reach a destination, we are not getting caught into the known, and the truth just reveals itself.

In the Buddha's teachings, the Pali word for faith is *saddhā*. It means different things. It really means very deep confidence, deep conviction in the process of meditation practice itself. It's basically this confidence in ourselves when we're engaged in an intense meditation retreat like this one. We rely on a path that is beneficial for us. We can undertake it without hesitation because whatever we meet is exactly what will reveal the truth. So we can't go wrong. The hindrances, when they're seen for what they are, are stepping stones to our understanding. Everything is part of the practice. Everything is enabling us to liberate the mind and heart. So there's nothing to get rid of and nothing to get.

When we are present in this way, we may ask ourselves: What have I come for? What is actually happening right now? Rather than the question, "How can I get rid of this? What can I do to change this situation?" Just staying present. Being able to truly see, clearly see the nature of experience as it is. And then wisdom is present. Wisdom is liberating.

In my own practice, there have been so many moments of deep, deep hardship, difficulty, even despair. So many moments of despair where you think it's going to be the end and you want to roll up the mat and leave. Even on day one, you might have that kind of thought: "How am I going to be able to do this?" And you have this sense of so many days ahead. That is happening when we don't have the sense of faith, of trust. What is present is closing us down, shutting off ourselves from who we are. And truly, when this is happening, it's difficult. This is exactly when you need to recall a moment when you've had faith. In retrospect, you remember a moment when you've had the sense of trust. Or you call forth the memory of a teacher or the Buddha or the Dhamma, really relying on something that will give you support.

Sharon Salzberg, as you probably know, has written a book on faith. She says that despair is the opposite force of faith. In the texts, we speak of doubt as being the opposite force of faith. But she says when despair hits, it really is the moment when we need to recall and call forth our deepest sense of trust. We need to have the humility to accept what is happening, and we are able then to surrender to just that momentary experience of difficulty, of hardship.

What I've seen for myself is that when there's despair, added to that deep pain is the feeling of shame or blame. And when we are relating to that shame or blame, it really feels real. It really then feels like this is me.

And it's not at all the passing state. It's not just the nature of the mind manifesting a state which is temporary, one that will change. And so we need to learn how to work with emotions. This, of course, will be talked about—knowing that, again, whatever it is that we are meeting, there's a process of purification. We're bound to meet the difficulties because we're really facing the whole, the entire mind and body. And to stay in balance requires this process that will lead to trust that everything is okay. Absolutely everything that we're meeting is perfectly okay. Okay because the truth is that nothing is permanent.

Sharon says in her book that the literal translation for *saddhā* is "to place one's heart upon." And I think that is the most beautiful rendering of that quality of *saddhā*. To give ourselves over to, to surrender to the truth—this will enable a true conviction that yes, this is liberating.

We can think of the Bodhisattva's path to awakening, the Buddha-to-be, who lived for so many years away from all forms of unpleasantness because everything was done for him not to see the unpleasant. His father, the king, did not want him to meet the reality of life. And every time—can you imagine?—he would have different palaces, and every time he would come out of his palaces, the servants would be given the duty to clean out the streets so that he would not see any type of suffering.

But as you know, on one occasion, on his own initiative, he came out unexpectedly. And it's said that he met the four heavenly messengers: an old person, a sick man, a corpse, and a monk. This changed his whole life perspective. He asked—he couldn't believe it—he asked the charioteer, "Is this the predicament of every human being? Is this what is happening to all human beings? To get old, to be sick, to die?" And sure enough, the response was yes, this is. And this was enough for the Bodhisattva to really awaken this sense of spiritual urgency, to walk the path to full awakening. Not only did he walk it himself, never discouraged when faced with difficulties, but he was moved to alleviate the suffering of all beings by offering the teachings.

To this day, at least to my own heart, it's an immense source of inspiration that this was just a human being like us. No *deva*, just in the same condition—the same condition of having a body that hurt. It's said there was nothing different. And yet, this calling for him was so deep that he walked the path to realize full liberation. And then he offered this one word: *Ehi passiko*. Come and see for yourself. Make of yourself a light. Enabling our own possibility, our own yearning to awakening—a possibility, a deep search.

And we have the great fortune here, entering retreat for six weeks, three months, to be able to live that from morning to evening. To really see so deeply within ourselves, understanding what causes suffering in ourselves, how to liberate the mind, the heart,

the body from that suffering. And even if we think that at times we can't do it anymore, that we're done—just remember your aspiration. Just remember why you came. Often in the midst of the work, the process, we forget the aspiration, and we need a recalling of that inspiration.

In those moments, talking to a teacher is extremely valuable—to really be truthful. I know that for myself, when I've had hard times, I would not always express the difficulties, wanting to manifest my best side. And yet it was just so important to really be humble and sincere in my devotion to seeing the truth, and to receive help. All of my teachers, when I have expressed difficulty, have said, "It's okay. If you come a little closer, really meeting what is present, you'll see for yourself that it's okay."

What causes greater suffering—and this tendency of ours is completely natural—is to move away from the suffering, to create a distance from the pain that we're feeling. That is not wanting to feel what is happening. And therefore that very distance is just the pain of reactivity. It's that pain that makes us feel fragmented, disconnected.

It's a process. It's really a process. We will see for ourselves when we stay very close to the present moment—then the truth is revealed. What is true is that in the reality, in the wisdom, there is no fragmentation, no separation. And that taste of freedom, when it happens, even glimpses, is what keeps us going. It's again that force, that strength of heart that enables us to meet those moments when we have fear, when we have deep pain, when we feel inadequate, or when we compare ourselves to others.

We will have cycles, and this has been said. There are moments when everything is beautiful, we want to stay here for the next ten years, it couldn't be better, and there's no way that we want to leave retreat.

And it's wonderful that these moments happen. We open, we wake up, we receive those moments when all the beauties of our lives, all the beautiful aspects of the spiritual journey, manifest. And we have moments when it's going to be more difficult. Every bit of it is part of the practice.

As part of the poem that was offered last night: *I knew myself completely. No part left out.* There's absolutely no mistake about what is unfolding. And it's such a relief when we truly trust that there's no mistake. Everything is born and everything dies out of causes and conditions.

In that light, we don't need to hide away from what is unpleasant. Just like the bodhisattva who ventures beyond the walls of the palace, we are here in the same way, invited to venture beyond the walls of habitual tendencies. And it's incredibly easy to think that we are safer if we stay within the walls. The tendency is to stay in confinement, in the known.

Why is that? Even if it reveals suffering and pain—it's incredible, at least in my own practice, how much I've seen and how often I've seen the tendency to stay within habitual confinement. And that is simply because it's familiar. Even if it's painful, what is familiar seems to feel safe.

So whether it's fear, whether it's the obsessive mind, whether we see doubt over and over again—however the afflictive emotions are happening—we are developing the willingness to explore a new field, one that we don't know. It is faith that inspires that willingness to move beyond the known, the capacity to question whether the habit needs to be in place. A sense of direction born out of interest enables us to stay awake and not waver. Surrendering with humbleness to the unknown.

The spiritual teacher Trungpa said, "Spiritual awakening is facing one insult after another." It's so humbling. For all of us on the path, what we see is not always something we want to look at, and yet it's such a purifying process. It doesn't belong to us. It's not personal.

Remember that mindfulness and wisdom within the process of meditation will reveal aspects of ourselves that we don't like. And yet it's okay. We don't need to hide away. Within meditation, it's really important to allow everything to come to the surface. That is the way we will reveal great liberation.

An inner calling has brought us here—for sure an inner calling accompanied by faith, whether we know it or not. Many other wholesome qualities of mind and heart will also give us direction, enabling the aspiration we have to flourish. May we allow the natural openness of the heart to support this yearning, this journey to awakening, this journey to freedom.

I'd like to close with the first words the Buddha expressed as a teacher. He says: *Opened are the gates of the deathless. Opened are the gates of immortality. You that have ears to hear, release your faith.*

Release your faith. Walk with your faith as nourishment.

CHAPTER 3

Morning Instructions Joseph Goldstein #2

Joseph Goldstein · 1h02

> *In this morning instruction session from the 2007 three-month retreat at IMS, Joseph Goldstein offers guidance on establishing a spacious, receptive awareness practice. He introduces the practice of "choiceless awareness" - being mindful moment after moment of whatever presents itself, whether sensations, sounds, or thoughts - while also teaching when it may be skillful to stabilize attention on a particular object like the breath or sitting posture.*
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> *A central teaching in this session is the investigation of attitude (dhammavicaya). Goldstein encourages practitioners to periodically ask: "What is the attitude in the mind right now about what's presently arising?" This inquiry reveals often-unnoticed patterns of liking and disliking, wanting and resistance, even toward simple experiences like breathing. He emphasizes that this investigation is not conceptual analysis but a direct feeling-into experience that enlivens awareness.*
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> *Goldstein offers practical guidance for working with torpor, suggesting practitioners first check their attitude toward sleepiness, then investigate its actual qualities - noting that calm often exists within drowsiness. He clarifies that insight arises intuitively rather than through thought, with words being merely the expression of understanding. The talk concludes with a reminder about maintaining mindfulness during transitions between activities, where awareness is most easily lost, and touches on the Buddha's teaching that our actions (kamma) are our true property - "provisions for the journey" through existence.*

Sit and know you're sitting.

Relax into that space of openness, receptivity. Let the eyes relax, the jaw. Let the shoulders relax. Relax the heart, the belly, the legs, the feet. Just sitting and knowing you're sitting.

Be aware of whatever presents itself in this space of openness. Maybe different sensations in the body become predominant. Maybe the feeling of the breath as it enters and leaves the body. Maybe different sounds that appear. Moment after moment, some new experience is presenting itself. Simply be aware of whatever arises, not pushing it away, not holding on.

If thoughts or images should arise, simply be aware that thinking is happening, or an internal seeing. Notice whether there's a wanting or an expectation in the mind for something in particular to happen, or whether the mind is simply present for whatever it is that actually is happening.

At times we practice a very open choiceless awareness—moment after moment being mindful of what presents itself: sensation, sound, a thought. At other times it may be helpful to let the mind rest on a particular object of experience. It might be the breath, it might be sounds, it might be the sitting posture. There can be a very natural rhythm, an intuitive rhythm, between an open choiceless awareness and times when we're stabilizing the awareness on a particular object.

With whatever is arising in each moment, pay attention to the attitude in the mind about that experience. You can check the attitude. Is there liking or disliking? Is there wanting or resistance? Periodically in the sitting, ask yourself the question: what's the attitude in the mind right now about what's presently arising? You can ask the question with respect to sensations, to sounds, to thoughts, to the breath. Even with something as simple as breathing in and breathing out, there are often unnoticed attitudes. We might want something. We might be resisting something.

Keep the practice very simple. It's being aware of what the mind knows. The knowing happens quite spontaneously. Mind is drawn to the breath, to a sensation, to a sound. That's quite a spontaneous process. The practice is to simply be aware of what the mind knows and to check the attitude in the mind about it.

It's very instructive to check the attitude, particularly with strong sensations in the body. Is the attitude one of openness, receptivity, equanimity? Or do pleasant and unpleasant feelings condition liking, wanting, aversion, resistance? Just notice. This is the process of investigation. What are you aware of in this moment? What is the attitude in the mind? Is it open? Is it wanting? Is there resistance?

Where is the mind right now?

When you hear the bell, notice how effortlessly the sound is known. Sound appears and is known. Simply be aware of the experience of hearing. The vibration of the sound appears and then fades, appears and fades.

I love that moment of hearing the bell—not just because it ends the sitting, but because actually the whole Dharma is right there in the sound of the bell. The ease with which we can be aware of the vibration of sound, where it's just that settling back, not

doing anything, the sound just appears, and we can, in the most easeful and effortless way, be aware of the changing nature of the vibrations, how it appears and how it disappears.

The whole practice is nothing more than that. That same attitude that you have in the hearing of the bell—can you practice bringing that attitude to every other experience? There's nothing more that need be done.

The gathering of the troops.

Before people introduce themselves, I just wanted to say something. You know, people come here to practice and everything seems like it just goes so smoothly. The meals are out, you have your rooms, the building is taken care of, the grounds look beautiful, the toilets work—there's a lot of effort and energy that goes into this very smooth operation. These are the people responsible for it.

So maybe we could start at one end, and if you introduce yourself and say what department you work in, you'll get some sense of the energy it takes and the tremendous sense of service that everybody brings to the center.

Thank you. Thank you all.

So as you can see, you have quite a support team.

Do you have any questions about your practice or about the instructions?

Someone asks about the threefold bliss.

I'm not totally sure either. There are different interpretations of it. One is the bliss of non-remorse, of sīla—the bliss of virtue, the bliss of concentration, and the bliss of wisdom or freedom. So that's one threefold interpretation. The other interpretation is that it refers to different levels of concentration absorption—the realms of form, the formless realms, and then liberation. So maybe we'll make it the sixfold bliss.

A practitioner describes struggling with torpor during their sitting.

Could you hear the question in the back? First, in the investigation of the torpor, was it more than "here we are again"? Because one aspect is the recognition—oh yes, torpor is here. That's the "here we are again." And right in there would be an interesting time to ask the question: what's the attitude in my mind about it? Because even in that way of expressing it, it sounds like there was a little aversion to it. Maybe not, but you would want to investigate that. How are you holding it? What's the relationship to the torpor?

And then the investigation could bring you right into the middle of it to see: well, what is it like? What does it feel like in the body? What does it feel like in the mind? There's really an active unpacking of the experience that we're calling torpor, or tiredness.

Within that, it can also be very interesting—often within that experience of sleepiness, there's a thread of something quite wholesome, surprisingly enough. Generally there's a feeling of calm. In the feeling of sleepiness, we're not restless. There's not agitation. So sometimes I've found it helpful, if we can disidentify with any aversion we're having to the state and wanting to get rid of it, to actually look in closely and see what it is. Sometimes we can pull that thread of calm from the middle of it, become aware of the calm, and see what happens with that.

So there's a lot to do in the investigation. If you do all that—you check your attitude, see whether there's resistance or wanting it to go away, go right into the middle of it, see what it's about, see if there's calm—if you do all that and you're still drowning in it, then it might be helpful to either go to mettā or to come back to the breath or something to energize the mind a bit. But I wouldn't jump to the alternative too quickly.

Another practitioner asks about investigating without creating more thinking.

Good question. How does one investigate without just creating a lot more thought and then staying in the realm of thinking?

The investigation has to do with a direct... and here language gives us difficulty. We have to use a lot of different words to get at the actual experience. I was going to say a direct looking, a direct seeing, but even those words add to that mix. A direct feeling of what's happening. Because sometimes if we use too much watching language or seeing language, it creates a sense of someone here looking at something. It's more from the inside. That's why I like feeling language to describe the practice.

You can use a thought as a leading question—for example, "What's the attitude?" or "What does this feel like?" But those questions are not for the purpose of getting a conceptual answer. The thought process could end right there in terms of the investigation.

You use the thought simply to prime that looking, feeling, seeing. It becomes a way of heightening the awareness of the actual experience. So it's not really a thought process at all, except perhaps for that initial priming.

This is what I've found very helpful—this question: *What's the attitude in the mind?* Just periodically through the sitting, with whatever is happening. Sometimes I do it quite randomly. I'll be sitting and then ask: *What's the attitude with whatever it is that's happening?* It could be a sensation, could be the breath. Just that question enlivens things. We see things that we might not have noticed.

So that's what investigation means. It doesn't mean conceptual analysis.

Often the insight we have—and this would be interesting for you to check out, just to see if this is true in your experience—in the moment of the insight, it's actually a very intuitive understanding. We're just going along, going along, and suddenly we see something or understand something that we didn't see before. That insight is then expressed in words. But the words are not the insight itself. The words are the expression of the insight. See if that makes sense in your own experience.

One word of caution: those moments of insight and then the expression of them can be so interesting, so juicy, so entertaining, that we chew on them a lot. Chew once or twice, and then swallow. You don't want the mind just going around in circles, even if it's around what we understand to be a dharma insight. Have it, recognize it, even as it's expressed in words, and then just keep the practice going along.

This understanding means that everything we possess in the world will eventually be lost. All our possessions and relationships and even this mind and body—it comes and it goes. But what's sustained throughout our long evolution over lifetimes is our actions and the fruit of those actions. That karmic unfolding is why it's called our true property.

This is just a little aside, but I really like this. In the Buddhist understanding, there's a lot of emphasis on the whole concept of merit, of skillful actions. One of the definitions of merit is "provisions for the journey." When I read that, it just landed—*oh, yes*. If we're on a journey, we always benefit from being well-provisioned. That's what merit means.

One thing as you go through the day: the place where mindfulness is most easily lost—I want to highlight it as a particular area to remember—is in transitions, as you're going from one activity to another. It's so easy. We're mindful in whatever activity we're doing, and then there's something else to do. In that transition time, our mind just jumps ahead. We get caught up and our mind is ahead of ourselves.

So the transition periods between activities are as important as everything else in the day. Watch, and again ask the question: *What's the attitude in the mind right now as I'm going from this to that?* Then the day becomes very alive. The day really becomes

seamless in the practice of awareness. As Myoshin said in the instructions yesterday, it can all be very easeful. It doesn't mean a hard focus. It means that easeful presence of mind.

That's what we're practicing.

It's not that somebody forgot to ring the bell. Just to remind you of that.

CHAPTER 4

Mettā - Guided Meditation

Rebecca Bradshaw · 42 min

> *In this guided meditation session, Rebecca Bradshaw introduces mettā (loving-kindness) practice as part of a twelve-week exploration of the four brahmavihāras, or divine abodes. She explains how mettā differs from vipassanā practice—it is more active, involving the intentional cultivation of an open, friendly heart rather than receptive awareness. The talk explores various translations of mettā including loving-kindness, goodwill, and loving friendliness, emphasizing that we are accessing and fanning innate embers of love rather than creating something new.*
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> *Bradshaw offers the beautiful teaching from Sri Nisargadatta: "Wisdom tells me I'm nothing. Love tells me I'm everything. And between these two, my life flows." She explains how wisdom practice and mettā balance each other—wisdom without warmth can become dry, while mettā without wisdom can lead to attachment. The four brahmavihāras are introduced: mettā (loving-kindness), karuṇā (compassion), muditā (appreciative joy), and upekkhā (equanimity).*
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> *The guided meditation moves through traditional categories, beginning with self and then the benefactor—the easiest person to feel unconditional friendliness toward. Bradshaw offers both longer and shorter phrases as supports, while emphasizing that phrases are optional tools to access the heart's natural capacity for friendliness. She normalizes the full range of experiences that may arise, including resistance or irritation, noting these as part of the purification process. The session concludes by extending mettā to the sangha, all beings on the land, and ultimately to all beings everywhere.*

Tonight we will start our weekly Brahma Vihara practice, beginning with metta. I'd like to speak for a few minutes before we begin the actual practice to set the stage. I know some of you may already be quiet and ready to start meditating, but since this is tonight's focus, let me say a few words about what we're doing with metta meditation.

We'll be offering this meditation once a week for the next twelve weeks. It's actually not just metta but the whole four Brahma Viharas, which I'll explain in a few minutes. It's good to set the stage and talk a little about what metta practice is and how it's different from what we've been doing.

This word metta is translated in a number of different ways. Sometimes it's translated as goodwill. Loving-kindness is the most common translation. Loving friendliness, I've heard, is a more literal translation. Sometimes we even call it unconditional love, because with metta we are developing a kind of open-heartedness that is unconditional—an open, friendly heart that wishes others well, no matter what.

With metta practice, we're developing the intention to bring kindness and gentleness to our hearts and then to share that first towards ourselves and then towards others in ever-widening circles, eventually to all beings everywhere.

The wisdom practice also opens our hearts—through understanding and through peace. When through understanding we feel at peace with life as it is, then we don't need to be defended. Then our hearts are naturally open. The metta practice is a more conscious way to develop this open-heartedness, this friendly heart. It's about cultivating our innate capacity to feel friendliness, to extend friendliness. So it's not something that we have to create, but rather something that we access and cultivate. It's like within our hearts we have these embers of love, of friendliness, of metta. And with metta practice, we fan them so that the energy of these embers grows.

The metta practice softens and strengthens our hearts, both. Very beautiful in that way.

The wisdom practice and the metta practice really balance each other. There's a well-known quote by Sri Nisargadatta that explains this. He says, "Wisdom tells me I'm nothing. Love tells me I'm everything. And between these two, my life flows."

The risk of doing the wisdom practice without this warmth of metta is that it can become dry or cold. The risk of doing the metta practice without wisdom is that it can lead to attachment, not based in the reality of life as it is. So we really need to develop both in our spiritual practice.

Metta is the first of what are known as the four Brahma Viharas, or divine abodes. There's loving friendliness, which is the foundation practice. Then there's the compassion practice, which is turning that friendliness towards the suffering that's in this world and in others' lives. Then there's the mudita or appreciative joy practice, which is turning our attention to the happiness and success in others' lives and appreciating it. And then there's the equanimity practice, which is about understanding and accepting life as it is with the full range of joys and sorrows that we all experience.

These four together make a really nice balanced practice in how we can relate to other beings in this world—relate to their joys, their sorrows, relate to life as it is.

The metta practice is going to feel different than the wisdom practice we've been doing. It's much more active. Some people feel it as more work because it's so much more active. What we're going to do is call up the metta that is in our hearts and then extend it to others.

The traditional order is that first we turn this loving friendliness towards ourselves and wish ourselves well. Then traditionally the next person is known as the benefactor—that's the easiest person we can think of. Then we turn this metta towards another person that we love. So we start out easy. And then we include a neutral person, somebody we don't know well. And then a difficult person, somebody we are having some struggles with. Then we go from personal categories to what are known as the impersonal categories, or groups of beings, and then all beings everywhere.

There are various ways that we can support this feeling of metta in our hearts. One traditional way is to remember our own goodness, or the goodness of whichever person we're cultivating metta for. Another way is with phrases that I'll offer while we do the practice—phrases that are meant to help us bring forth that feeling of friendliness and kindness.

Some of you have probably done metta practice at some point, and some of you may just love metta, think it's great. And some of you may not like it at all. I just want you to know that all those responses are just fine.

My first eight years of practice, I hated metta practice. When they did this thing in the hall that we're doing tonight, I wouldn't come. Now I love metta practice. So you don't have to force it if it's not what your heart wants to be doing—it's fine. You can just do the wisdom practice and notice hearing when I interrupt with thought guidance for this practice. You can't force metta. You can see that that wouldn't make a whole lot of sense. It's a friendly kind of energy. You can't force it.

Also, when you're doing metta and we're doing the practice, we have this intention to touch our open-heartedness, our friendliness. We use the supports of the phrases or remembering the goodness. And then we just see what happens. Sometimes we may feel friendly and sometimes we may not. Sometimes the metta practice actually brings up the difficulties, the blocks to our love, and that's part of the practice. So sometimes we may feel irritation, actually, when we do metta practice. And that doesn't mean that you're doing it wrong. It just means that the purification process is happening—seeing where your heart is blocked. It's part of the practice. And then other times it may flow very nicely. So it's really about letting go of expectations, like we've been telling you with the wisdom practice, to let go of expectations and to see what happens and to include and hold whatever happens.

Just a couple more words about the two categories that we'll be working with tonight: self and benefactor. I will be guiding the meditation, so I'll be giving instructions, and then there will be some periods of silence while you practice.

Self I don't think I need to say a lot about, but I do want to say a few words about the second category, which is the benefactor. It's traditionally called the benefactor. Sometimes it's just called the easy person. It's really meant to be the person that we find the easiest in the whole world to feel unconditionally friendly towards. Traditionally, when this is taught in the East, it's often recommended that it's somebody who you respect a lot, or a mentor or a teacher, or somebody who has really helped you a lot in life. Sometimes here in the West, people relate more to perhaps a child—perhaps not your own child, because that's not always the easiest person, because attachment comes up very easily—but perhaps your grandchild or your niece or your nephew or a revered relative, a grandparent, aunt or uncle. Just whoever you can think of for whom your feelings are least complicated. So that's our benefactor, our easy category. At some point in the meditation, I'll suggest that if you wish to, you can work with that person.

When we do metta, we'll be working with an image of the person, the sense of metta, and the phrases if you'd like. They're optional, but some people find them useful and others don't.

So, at that, we'll start with metta. It's really important to be comfortable, so take as comfortable a position as possible. Even feel free to move to a chair if you'd like to be a little more comfortable. It's hard to cultivate metta if there's a lot of physical pain going on, so it's definitely recommended to be comfortable.

We can start by settling into our posture. Feeling the connection with our body sitting here. Inviting any places of tension to relax.

Then directing your attention to your heart center to see what you notice there. Maybe you can feel the beating of your heart. You can put your hand on your heart.

Starting by seeing if you can connect to your basic goodness. You can bring an image of yourself to mind if that's helpful. Perhaps at a time when you were happy. At a time when you can connect to your own purity.

And then wishing yourself well. Knowing that you fully deserve love, care, gentleness. Extending friendliness towards yourself. Extending that heart energy of openness and acceptance.

Relaxing into the recognition of your goodness, your beauty, your purity.

If you wish, you can use the phrases to help you touch into your heart's capacity for friendliness—holding a sense of yourself or an image of yourself and sending these metta blessings, seeing if you can receive them at the same time.

May I be safe and protected. May I be happy and peaceful. May I be strong and healthy. May I take care of myself easily and joyfully while living on this earth.

Or shorter phrases if they work better for you: *May I be safe. May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I take care of myself with ease.*

Allow metta to come from that wordless place of your heart, the depth of your heart, that friendly attitude—or if you wish, use the phrases to remind yourself of that friendliness. If you have your own phrases that elicit this feeling of friendliness and kindness, you can use them. It's not important exactly which phrases are used.

When the attention wanders, gently bring it back to cultivating, nourishing this feeling of metta—wishing for yourself the blessings of happiness, peace, safety. Each time you're distracted, see if you can gently return to wishing yourself well, either wordlessly from the intention of your heart, with an image, or with whichever phrases elicit that friendliness and kindness toward yourself. Sending and receiving the blessing of metta.

You can continue with yourself if you wish, or if you'd like, you can switch to cultivating metta for the easy person, the respected person—bringing this person to mind. Perhaps take a few moments to reflect on his or her good qualities, what it is that makes this person so easy to love. Then call forth either an image of this person or just the felt sense of them, and extend these metta blessings from your heart. Wish this person happiness, wish him or her ease of well-being, shower him or her with metta blessings.

May you be safe and protected. May you be happy and peaceful. May you be strong and healthy. May you take care of yourself easily and joyfully while living on this earth.

Find the way that you most easily connect with this person. It may be a wordless extension of metta from your heart. It may be short phrases or just simple words—happy, safe, peaceful—or it may be the longer phrases. If any obstacles arise, see if you can gently put them aside, extending the metta wishes, the intention to wish well.

We end our metta sit tonight by taking a moment to appreciate our sangha, our community here, and to wish our fellow yogis well as we journey on together. Extend our metta to fill this hall, reaching all the yogis and other beings that may be here.

May you be safe and protected. May you be happy and peaceful. May you be strong and healthy. May you take care of yourself easily and joyfully while living on this earth.

Extending our metta outward to all the beings on this land—the staff that serves us, the birds and the crickets, the little chipmunks, the deer, the flies, the frogs, beings both seen and unseen. *May you be happy.*

And extending our metta outward in all directions to all beings everywhere. *May all beings everywhere be safe.*

May all beings everywhere be happy. May all beings everywhere be healthy. May all beings everywhere experience ease of well-being while living in this universe.

If you find that the metta meditation resonates with you and proves useful, you can feel free to begin your sittings with a few minutes of metta practice, if that helps you to gentle and soften. Or if you'd like, you can choose one sitting each day to dedicate entirely to metta practice. Feel free to incorporate it in whatever way serves you best throughout your day.

One caution: it's often not as useful in the middle of a sitting to switch back and forth between practices. It can become confusing because there is a distinctly different flavor to these two different practices. So it's often useful to know when you're going to do your metta practice, do it at that time, and then do the wisdom practice knowing clearly that that's what you're doing.

The schedule this evening is a little bit different. You probably noticed, but if you didn't, there's walking for forty-five minutes, then a sitting at seven forty-five, followed by another walking and another sitting—just slightly different times than when we have the talk in the evening.

May you be happy.

CHAPTER 5

Morning Instructions Myoshin #4

Myoshin Kelley · 1h02

> *In this morning instruction from the 2007 Three-Month Retreat at IMS, Myoshin Kelley begins by inviting practitioners to examine the attitude they bring to formal sitting practice. She points out how our approach often contains seeds of greed (wanting, striving, forcing), aversion (blocking, pushing away), or delusion (disconnecting, disengaging), and encourages a receptive openness that allows things to be seen as they are. When we notice these tendencies without judgment, there can be a natural settling and relaxation.*
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> *The talk explores the relationship between mindfulness and thinking. Kelley describes how we often become completely immersed in thought worlds—fantasies, memories, plans—losing awareness of everything else. She distinguishes between being lost in thought and knowing that thinking is occurring, explaining how moments of mindfulness string together to become information, then understanding, and finally wisdom. Through paying attention to thought without rejection, we begin to see cause and effect—how thoughts of anger or fear affect both mind and body.*
>
> *The latter portion addresses the eight precepts (aṭṭha sīla) as tools for investigation and simplification. Kelley emphasizes these are not about becoming 'better' than others but about discovering what is extra and can be let go. She discusses the sixth precept (refraining from eating after midday), the seventh (refraining from entertainment and self-adornment), and the eighth (refraining from high and luxurious seats), encouraging practitioners to use these as bases for investigating underlying intentions and motivations rather than rigid rules.*

As we enter into this period of formal sitting meditation, as we enter into any day of practice, it can be helpful to notice the attitude with which we're approaching. Whether our attitude carries within it seeds of greed, aversion, and delusion, or whether the attitude is that of simply wanting to see things as they are—an attitude that invites receptivity, openness, acceptance.

Many times the way in which we're approaching the practice has within it greed, aversion, and delusion. If it's not seeing, we simply plant seeds of greed, aversion, and delusion. We find greed in our wanting, striving, pushing, forcing. We find aversion too, which becomes very tiring—trying to block out experience, get rid of, not wanting. And sometimes we practice in a way that we want to disconnect, disengage, which will only lead to further confusion and doesn't lead to true wisdom.

It's very helpful to notice if any of these tendencies are there. And in the seeing, not to be judgmental or harsh—perhaps in the seeing of it, it simply lets go. We see the leaning forward, the anticipation. And in that recognition, it's like, "Oh, we don't need to do this." There's a settling back. In this way, whatever our attitude is becomes instructive. We learn from it. It helps us to establish an attitude that is helpful, that is useful.

So checking the very stance in which we're sitting here—sometimes it's reflected in the body. Sometimes there's a sense of putting on the cloak of meditation, something we do. Just noticing if there's a tightness with that. And in the seeing of the tightness, is there relaxation? Relaxing both body and mind as best we can. There can be a sense of having climbed up to the top of the mountain and then just sitting there, knowing that relaxing is happening.

Sometimes awareness of the facial muscles will reveal to us if there are levels of holding, tightness. Just noticing. Relaxing into presence. Receiving this moment as it is. Life's lessons arriving on our doorstep to be understood.

This body, its sensations—being able to know it, to know the nature of this body: heat, pressure, tightness. This mind. Awareness of the activities of mind. The moods of the mind. The states of mind that Rebecca spoke of yesterday. Seeing how the mind is at times colored or has an atmosphere. Fear. Anger. Joy. Contentment.

Many times the experience in this moment will be the awareness of thinking, thoughts arising—a natural process. Just as the ears hear, the eyes see, the mind thinks. Can we recognize this? To see thought as thought, a natural process. There's often the tendency to identify with these thoughts, to become these thoughts. Many times we find ourselves immersed in a thought world where there's such deep involvement that everything else disappears. We live in a fantasy, a memory. We live in some plan for the future, totally taken up by this thought and become involved with it.

Just needing to recognize the awareness of thinking mind, noticing the difference between being lost in the thought and knowing that thinking is occurring. It may flip back and forth—a sense of being involved, and then awareness of thinking.

Being involved, awareness of thinking. Each moment that there is mindfulness is a moment of receiving data. When moments of mindfulness string together, we find that through each of these moments of receiving data, it grows into information. As information grows, it becomes understanding.

Paying attention to thought without rejecting it, but really wanting to understand what is happening here—we begin to see cause and effect. We begin to see how there can be a thought in the mind, a thought of anger, and it has an effect. There may be a

great volatility in the mind. The body may become tense. Or maybe there's a thought of fear. We keep thinking about something horrible about to happen, and we can see that the mind state of fear begins to accelerate, strengthen. We pay attention and we come to understand this, to see this.

When there's enough information, wisdom comes forth. Wisdom understands: we don't need to do this. It's not useful. It's not helpful. And this understanding arises not from a place of aversion, not from not wanting, but through understanding.

Many times these thoughts will have a strong pull—deeply habituated, something that holds complete enchantment over us. We meet it with interest. What's so compelling? What's happening here? It can be a joyful interest. Notice if in that interest there tends to be judgment: "Oh look, here you go again." Or is it, "Wow, look at this! What's so compelling about this thought that keeps replaying itself over and over, and we don't even like it? It's not pleasant, it's unpleasant."

Perhaps we drop into an energetic sense. Feel the pull. Let it be revealed what the pull is towards. It might be some pleasantness. Self-righteousness can have this sense of puffing oneself up—there can be a pull to that. Whatever it is, let it reveal itself.

This interest brings a steadiness. It's that willingness to look at a compelling story and to know its components: the mind state that's present, the thoughts that feed it, the impact of those thoughts. Notice if within this story there's the weaving of "I am." Notice the effect when it's "I am my sadness" versus when it's just sadness.

If we find the stories so compelling that there's a sense of getting sucked into them, we can turn the attention to some other aspect of experience, letting balance return to the mind. Or we can work with recognizing—if the story seems to come out of a state of fear—recognizing the fear, opening to it for a moment, and then noticing a more neutral aspect of experience: the breath, hearing, the body posture. Resting the mind there for a moment, and then returning attention to the fear. Alternating between what's difficult and what's neutral helps bring steadiness in the face of difficulty, rather than being pulled into and identified with the experience.

All aspects of experience are to be known. No part left out.

Before I open it up to questions this morning, I wanted to review a little bit about the eight precepts. Annie spoke about these precepts on our opening night, and for some of you it may have been new, or just settling into the retreat, you may not have been quite ready to take the eight precepts. Just by way of invitation for those of you who would like to, this evening we will once again be chanting the precepts, and if you feel moved

to take eight precepts, this is an opportunity. Of course, you can do this any day—you can simply chant the eight precepts to yourself. But I wanted to speak a little more about them in case they are new to you.

I suppose first to begin with: why would we even do this? It can be simply a level of greater simplicity. I know for myself, when I've taken eight precepts, after the midday meal, life gets quite simple. One sits and walks, sits and walks, and maybe has a cup of tea or a glass of juice at some point.

One of the things this practice revealed to me was just how much, in the morning, my mind could obsess with food. What's for lunch? Will I like it? Will I get enough? Just how many thoughts there were around this. And suddenly, with the precept, that was simply gone. It was another level of simplicity—a way of looking to see what's extra, what can be let go of.

I really want to emphasize in speaking about these eight precepts that if you decide to take them, it doesn't make you better than anyone else or more of a renunciate. We all have different needs. For some people, not having anything after the midday meal would be too much for the body, too much for the energy system. It's really about looking for ourselves to see what, for us, is extra. Can we let go of it? It's using the container in just a slightly different way—having things that we're not doing that the mind might bump up against, which we can learn from, reflect something back to us. So simply see whether in your body-mind experience it makes sense to work in a slightly different way.

The sixth precept is to undertake the precept to refrain from eating at the wrong time, which means after the midday meal. So if you're taking this precept, after lunch there's no longer taking of solid food. If it's a clear liquid, it's fine. If it's clear juice, it's fine. And there will be juice put out for all of those who are on eight precepts.

Some people take medication, and medication is okay to take—some of it may need to be taken in the evening. Sometimes food needs to be taken with that medication. So then it's really seeing, okay, maybe a banana is what needs to be eaten with that medication. But it might start to turn into, later in our mind, "Well, with my banana, I think I need to have some cereal and milk and yogurt." And then we see there's a great proliferation. It's really just looking at what's truly needed here.

The next precept is to undertake the precept to refrain from dancing, singing, music, going to shows, wearing garlands, and beautifying oneself with perfumes and cosmetics. I think it's pretty self-explanatory, but there are interesting levels to the precept. They're not black and white. I was on eight precepts, and then one day noticed that I

really liked for my socks to match my outfit. I'd never been aware of it. And so it was just seeing, here was a level of beautifying oneself, adorning oneself. It's interesting. I love the precepts as a basis of investigation, as a basis of seeing what's the intention, the motivation behind what I do.

The eighth precept is to undertake the precept to refrain from using high and luxurious seats and beds. Your beds have been offered to you. But it's to see—it's this whole thing around comfort that we have. I've watched at times going for the most comfortable seat, putting pillows here and there, and that's a form of making it luxurious. Just noticing. And so can we really renounce and just work with what's here?

It may be that we have a certain back pain, back injury, and to take away the cushion completely is just going to injure the back. It doesn't seem like there's much point in that. But when we keep doing things from the perspective of wanting more comfort, more pleasure—that's what we need to notice.

You can take these precepts for the remainder of the retreat. That's one way to do it. Another way is to take the precepts on what's called observance days. These are days of the month according to the moon's phases that in traditional Buddhist countries, many people would go to the monastery and practice for that day. Lay people would undertake for a day to live by the eight precepts—not eating after the midday meal, simply simplifying for that day.

It's also possible that we may decide to take them and then discover we have hypoglycemia.

The energy system really can't handle it. That's okay. You can shift. It's not like you undertake this and you are chained to it forever. We're using it as exploration.

I think the kitchen does need to know if we are, for periods of time, doing the eight precepts so that they can put out tea accordingly. So just let the kitchen know.

Someone asked about where the line is with what's allowable. There is no distinctive line. What we find is that in different traditions, there are different allowables. In the Thai forest tradition, as it has come to the West—and I'm not quite sure if it's also true in Thailand—cheese, because it was made from certain products, was considered an allowable. And I think from the Thai tradition, cheese and chocolate were both allowables. Dark chocolate, that is—without the milk.

What to say? I never found it a healthy diet. I never found what it did for me so helpful. But I would say, if it's placed on the eight precept table, you can consider it an allowable, and then you can see for yourself whether it really fits to do that.

One of the things for me is this: if I sat all afternoon thinking about whether there would be cheese, whether there would be chocolate—I mean, you work with that. That's what comes up. And I think this really does point to the fact that there is no clear line, and that what is really useful is looking at what's happening in the mind. What's the underlying intention, motivation? Let that teach you.

Someone raised the experience of having music arise in the mind. That seems to be the way it is for some people, especially if we've had a lot of input from music. And again, it's really about looking at the relationship to it as it arises—that it's arising out of conditions, part of those conditions being that our world is filled with music, and so it's reflected. It comes back.

Notice how you're relating to that. Is there judgment? "It shouldn't be this way." Not wanting, or liking. Notice where that pull to hum along, to become involved, comes in. Really be interested in this, because that interest brings a freshness of mind to it.

What can happen is it gets perpetuated by a roteness of mind, by not seeing it clearly, by just letting it play and play and play. It's not that you're stopping it with mindfulness, but that you're recognizing it, and then you're seeing if it's being fed or not being fed.

Another interesting aspect I've heard—it's not so much been in my own experience, but I've heard people say that recognizing the mood in the mind can be really helpful. Because it's like on a happy day you get a happy tune, on a sad day you get a sad tune. And so by paying attention to what's there, you can really come into just the knowing of the totality of that experience.

Chanting is fine. Again, it comes down to intention. What's the intention? Chanting isn't done as a way of entertaining oneself through melody. And if it is, perhaps you might want to renounce your chanting. But for the most part, when we chant, we're aligning our hearts with something wholesome. These are the chants that we're offering, and it's a turning of the mind towards that which is wholesome. So it's not done by way of amusement—it's done from a wholesome motivation.

We're using these precepts here from the perspective of how we're working on this retreat. In this retreat, we all have different occupations, we come from different ways of life, different walks of life, so much different conditioning, so many different things we might do in our lives. And in being here, we're really just simplifying as a way to understand more clearly, to see more clearly the workings of the mind. That's the perspective from which we're doing this.

This isn't a statement that classical music is unwholesome. It's in no way meant to say that. What it may direct you towards is simply a deepening understanding of what's being touched, where that's coming from. It's like taking any career in life—there can be mixed motivations. Some of it may be wholesome. Sometimes we create our music out of wanting to enhance a sense of self, wanting to strengthen some unwholesome quality. And so this inquiry will help us to see if there are underlying things there. But it's not a statement about the music in itself, because that can come from very different places.

It's to notice what happens as we become aware of thinking. And that is one experience. It's already passed—it finishes. But actually, I want to do a very short exercise. I promise it will just be a couple of minutes. I'm running a little bit over, but just a very short exercise, because I think we can be more aware of thinking than we realize.

So just for a moment, sit with your eyes closed. And I want you to think. I want you to think without having a break between thoughts. It doesn't matter what the thought is. It can be totally gibberish. You can think about what you're wearing. You can think about what's happening. You can think about anything. Just keep thinking. And see if, as you're thinking, there is an awareness of thinking. That awareness is not involved in the thought. It's just knowing. But keep thinking. Keep the thoughts going. Keep perpetuating them.

It's their awareness. It's their knowing. Knowing that's not involved.

You can stop thinking.

So really, just to know with thoughts, there are a couple of really common experiences. The awareness of thinking happens, and the thought, like everything else, is subject to impermanence. It ceases, disappears. It's also possible the thought continues. Can we be aware of the thought without being involved in it?

It's very much like an old man sitting on a bench watching children play. He's watching these children, but he's not involved, he's not doing. Just that sense of awareness that this is occurring.

And it will be different at different times. It's just to see what happens. Sometimes we may notice in the recognition of thought, there can be a sense of subtly cutting off, pushing away. And that can just be noticed too.

Okay, so another day of practice. Great blessing. May the blessings of the Dhamma shower upon you.

CHAPTER 6

Knowing, Awareness and Wisdom

Joseph Goldstein · 1h02

> *In this foundational talk from the three-month retreat at IMS, Joseph Goldstein distinguishes between three often-confused terms essential to meditation practice: consciousness, mindfulness, and wisdom. He explains consciousness as the simple ongoing process of knowing sense objects—what he playfully calls "black lab consciousness"—that operates in all beings. Mindfulness, or sati, represents a qualitative shift: the present-moment remembering that we are knowing, stepping back from identification with experience. Drawing on Dudjom Rinpoche's powerful dharma poem, Goldstein emphasizes mindfulness as the root of all dharma practice.*
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> *The talk then explores wisdom as the investigative quality that builds upon mindfulness's foundation. Using Ajahn Chah's story about being disturbed by village music, Goldstein illustrates how wisdom sees the true nature of phenomena—that sound simply does what sound does, and suffering arises only when we "go out to bother it." He offers practical guidance on investigating physical sensations and recognizing the attitude of mind toward experience, noting that struggle always indicates non-acceptance of something arising.*
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> *Goldstein challenges the deeply conditioned tendency to evaluate meditation based on pleasant versus unpleasant experience, quoting Sayadaw U Tejaniya: "You only want pleasant experience... Is this the way of the Dhamma?" He shares a personal insight from experiencing extreme cold after a Caribbean vacation, revealing how consciousness itself has no preference—it simply knows. The talk concludes with Ajahn Mun's teaching that the mind is the foremost treasure, and understanding its true nature is the attainment of Nibbāna.*

Back in the mid-sixties, I first went to India to look for a teacher. I'd been in the Peace Corps in Thailand before that and had just begun a little bit of practice of meditation, but without really having gotten too much instruction. I came back to the States and tried to practice by myself, but it was extremely confusing. I was just mixing up everything I had heard—mantras and third eyes and the breath—kind of just a jumble of things. It didn't take long to realize that I could use some guidance.

So I went back to Asia thinking I might go to Thailand, but I wanted to stop in India first. I went around a bit looking for a teacher in different traditions and ended up in Bodh Gaya, which of course is the place of the Buddha's enlightenment. At that time, it was extremely undeveloped—just this small little village with the beautiful temple.

There were very few Westerners there, maybe half a dozen. Munindraji, my first teacher, had just come back after spending nine years in Burma at Mahasi Sayadaw's monastery.

I ended up staying at the Burmese Vihara, which was a monastery, or rather a resting place for Burmese pilgrims. But because Burma was closed at the time, it was pretty empty, and just a few Westerners in Bodh Gaya were staying there. They took me to Munindraji.

One day, as we were sitting around on the roof of the Vihara—this was right at the beginning of my stay—he went around to each of us and asked, as we did in the go-around the first morning, why did you come to practice? People had different responses, but for me it was really clear from the beginning that what drove me to practice, what brought me to practice, was the possibility of awakening.

People can start meditation from very different motivations. Some might begin the practice really as a way of stress reduction. We live in a very stressful society, very speedy, and sometimes people look to meditation as a way of reducing stress in their lives, which it certainly helps to do. Sometimes people are drawn to meditation because of a great desire to come out of psychological or emotional suffering. We can get so tied up in emotional and psychological knots that cause a lot of suffering for ourselves and others, and so that can be a motivation—how can I understand that? Or it might be the desire for liberation, for awakening, for enlightenment.

What's interesting to observe, and you may know this from your own experience, is that as we practice and as our understanding deepens, the motivation often changes. We may start motivated by one idea or feeling, but as we learn more and go deeper into the Dharma, it's as if our minds and hearts open to greater possibilities.

There are many different methods and techniques of insight meditation. Munindraji said that after he had studied with Mahasi Sayadaw, he went around Burma and studied fifty different ways of doing Vipassana. So it's not that there's just one approach. There are many methods of cultivating awareness, of cultivating mindfulness. But all of these techniques and methods are rooted in one discourse of the Buddha. That's why this particular discourse is so amazingly rich and powerful. As you know, it is the Satipatthana Sutta, the discourse on the foundations of mindfulness.

The Buddha opens this discourse—you know, sometimes they refer to certain statements of the Buddha or Arhants as the lion's roar, dramatic declarations. Well, the Buddha opens the discourse on mindfulness with an amazing statement. It's very unambiguous. The opening of the sutta says, "This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation."

for the disappearance of suffering and discontent, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of nibbana—namely, the four foundations of mindfulness.

And what are the four? Mindfulness of body, of feelings, of mind, and of dhammas. I'll leave *dhamma* untranslated here, but it often refers to the different categories of experience, including many of the well-known Buddhist lists.

So this is quite a statement. The Buddha is saying this is the direct path to liberation. This is the direct path to the end of suffering—namely, the four foundations of mindfulness. It's not an insignificant thing that we're undertaking here. We're embarking on a path that leads to the highest realization, that leads to the end of suffering. Over these next weeks and months, we'll be exploring in different ways these four foundations of mindfulness.

But I thought tonight it would be helpful to clarify and define three important terms. These terms often get confused, so having clarity about them will provide a good foundation for your practice.

The first of these terms is *consciousness*. Consciousness is the ordinary, ongoing process of knowing different objects of experience. This process is rolling along, proceeding in all beings. It's going on in animals, in human beings. It's going on in babies, in children, in adults. The same process of consciousness—knowing sights and sounds and smell and taste and sensations, different objects of mind.

I find it interesting sometimes just to watch a pet or a baby or a young child. We can see it so clearly in just observing them—that knowing process is going on. They're being led by all the things that consciousness is knowing: sights, sounds, tastes, just as we are. I really enjoy watching either a pet or a wild animal because you can just see the knowing mind being led by the senses. Sense impressions are happening moment after moment. I call it "black lab consciousness." If you're familiar with black labs, they're particularly delightful to watch.

This is quite an aside, but there's a wonderful line in a translation of a poem by Pablo Neruda, translated by Stephen Mitchell. It's one of my favorite lines in poetry for describing animals. He says, "Dogs are baffled lions." I get great delight watching dogs live their lives because it's kind of like baffled lions.

Anyway, that's an aside. Consciousness is the simple knowing of these different sense objects arising moment after moment. The knowing and its object always arise together, simultaneously. So it's a pairwise progression: knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. This is going on throughout our lives, in all beings.

The second term I want to discuss is *mindfulness*, or *awareness*. In this context, I'm using these terms synonymously. In some contexts, people do mean different things by mindfulness and awareness, but here I'm using them to mean the same thing.

Mindfulness or awareness sometimes gets confused with knowing. We use the words imprecisely—we're aware of something, we know something. But in a meditative understanding, they really refer to two quite different things. Mindfulness or awareness is that quality that is aware that we're knowing. It is aware that we're knowing a particular object. It is the present-moment remembering of what is happening in our experience. The word *sati* in Pali, often translated as mindfulness, is associated with remembering—this remembering in the moment.

Yes, this is what's happening. We know, we're aware that we know something. We're aware of what it is that we know.

So the ordinary knowing of different objects is how we're usually going through the day. And we're usually going through the day with black lab consciousness. We're just doing different things, engaged in all the activities. And in this black lab consciousness, just the simple knowing, we are acting out, unmindfully, all the habit patterns of our conditioning, all the habituated tendencies. We're just going along like that black lab.

But sometimes—and this happens more frequently with our meditation practice—we remember what we're doing as we're doing it. That's a moment of mindfulness. We can be lost, carried away. And then in a certain moment we remember, oh, this is what's happening. We become mindful of the object. We become mindful of the fact that we're knowing it. So it's one level of waking up.

A simple example of the difference between consciousness, that bare knowing, and mindfulness: just think back to the last time you were at the cinema, watching a movie. A good movie, very absorbed. As we're lost in the story, as we're just absorbed in the story of the movie, we have all the attendant emotions. Maybe we're excited or happy or sad or frightened, depending on what the movie is. And then maybe we have a moment when we suddenly remember, oh, this is just a movie. All that stuff is not really happening. In that moment of mindfulness, there's a little more space in the mind. We're not so totally identified with or lost in what's happening. It's like a moment of creating more space in which we're mindful of what's happening.

What's interesting here, and this would be worth examining in your own experience: before that moment of mindfulness, we are still knowing what's going on. The consciousness is there. We're not unconscious. And if somebody asked you afterwards what was in the movie, we would be able to tell them, because the knowing is there. The flow of consciousness is going on. It goes on all the time. But we're not always mindful in those moments of consciousness. Mindfulness is that stepping back from being lost in, stepping back from being completely identified with.

So our practice, even in the first few days, illuminates a tremendously important insight. It's an insight that you have all had already. And that is: we see how often our minds become absorbed in the movies of our minds. It's like there's an internal cinema. And we are in this movie theater, and a good part of the time we are lost in the story. Not only with the stories in the mind—just as we go through the day, we get lost in the knowing of different sense objects, in sights, in sounds, in smells. When we're not mindful that that's happening, it's just leading us around, just like the dogs are being led around by their senses.

One of the things that we see in being on retreat is how often this happens. And of course, all the internal phenomena as well—the memories, the plans, the fantasies, the wants. There's a whole internal drama going on. I'm sure you've noticed: you can just be sitting and one thought may arise, and if it's unnoticed, it's as if we just hop on a train of association. One thought leads to another, leads to another, leads to another. And before we know it, we're at some completely unpredictable destination. We're in a whole inner world scenario. How did we get here?

Sometimes we call this phenomenon the wandering mind, but I think that's not such a useful term, because the wandering mind implies something that we have to go get and bring back. So it's a bit of work. The mind doesn't actually wander anyplace. The mind is always right here. What we call the wandering mind is simply that objects are arising in the mind that are going unnoticed. You see the difference? It's not that the mind goes anyplace. The mind is always right here.

But when we don't notice what's arising, it seems as if the mind is wandering. So it's not so much the effort to drag the mind back to the present moment—it's always in the present moment. It's more a question of training ourselves to be aware of what's arising in the moment. That's a much more restful attitude. Not that it's any easier, but it's a more restful perspective.

Don't underestimate the value of this insight, of realizing how often the mind is lost in the thoughts and feelings and dramas of our minds. Because most people don't know this about their minds. If we went up to somebody on the street and asked, "Do you get

lost in what's happening in your mind?" they'd say, "Oh no, I know what's going on." Unless we have taken the time and turned the attention inward, people don't know. They don't know this about themselves. And because they don't particularly know it, they're not particularly motivated to wake up from this dreamlike flow of delusion.

This understanding that we all share—has anybody not seen this? I don't think so. It's an important one because it becomes a powerful motivating force. We see how often we're asleep, and it motivates us: Can I be more awake in my life?

This is the power of mindfulness. It's noticing, remembering the present moment. And instead of being lost or identified with what's arising, we know what's arising. We know that we know.

There's a dharma poem by one of our teachers who died some years ago. He was one of the really great Dzogchen masters in the Tibetan tradition, and he wrote this dharma song on mindfulness:

Mindfulness is the root of Dharma.
Mindfulness is the body of practice.
Mindfulness is the fortress of the mind.
Mindfulness is the aid to the wisdom of innate wakefulness.
Lack of mindfulness will allow the negative forces to overcome you.
Without mindfulness you will be swept away by laziness.
Lack of mindfulness is the creator of evil deeds.
Without mindfulness and presence of mind nothing can be accomplished.
Without mindfulness you are a heartless zombie, a walking corpse.
Dear Dharma friends, please be mindful.
And by the aspiration of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, may all Dharma friends attain stable mindfulness and ascend the throne of perfect awakening.

It's powerful. Unfortunately, the word in English doesn't really suggest the power of this quality of mind. It's kind of a prosaic word, "mindfulness." But when you really see what that quality is in the mind, it is an amazing quality. It's mindfulness which allows for this whole awakening process to take place. It's knowing that we know. It's stepping out of the dream.

As we relax into an awareness, a mindfulness of the body and mind, we begin to experience greater subtleties—greater subtleties about the sense objects and greater subtleties about the attitudes in our mind about experience. I'm sure you've seen already: we become much more intimate in our experience of the body. We begin to feel all kinds of sensations that we may not have even known were there. They're not necessar-

ily all pleasant, but our awareness gets much more refined. We begin to feel tightness and pressure and vibration and heat and cold and lightness and heaviness and softness and hardness. There's a whole world of sensation that begins to reveal itself as we become mindful. We go from the abstraction of having a body—"body" is an abstraction—to the actual felt sensations. That's where we're really in touch with what is going on.

Even just walking about through the day, instead of being led by unmindfulness like the black lab, with mindfulness we get much more subtly aware—even just of colors, shades of color, where we're not so fixated on the concept and we're just aware of seeing. It's interesting to bring seeing into the practice. It's a big domain of experience.

But we don't often bring clear, sustained mindfulness to it. What is it like just to have that soft awareness of seeing? So much is revealed. Or smelling. Or tasting. And of course, we become much more subtly aware of the thoughts and emotions in our minds.

So as we practice this mindfulness, this continuity of mindfulness, a certain momentum builds up, and it becomes both more effortless and also more refined. But mindfulness itself is not enough. Awareness itself is not enough. And this brings us to the third term.

There's consciousness—that simple knowing going on moment after moment in all beings. There's mindfulness or awareness, which is that moment of stepping out from being lost in that flow, where we're aware of what's happening, where we know that we're knowing. And the third term we need to understand in this meditative journey is wisdom.

Now, wisdom comes out of awareness. We could say mindfulness or awareness is the platform of wisdom, the foundation of wisdom. Wisdom combines the qualities of investigation. It is that quality of mind that is really investigating and looking deeply with what the Buddha called right understanding and right view. It's those times when we are learning from our experience. It's not just being mindful of what's there—that's the foundation, that's the platform. But we want to then bring an investigative wisdom so that we learn from what we're mindful of.

We begin to investigate from that platform of mindfulness: What is the nature of the experience that's presenting itself? We see that whatever is arising—whether it's some sensation in the body or a sight or a sound or an emotion or a thought—everything that arises is simply expressing its own nature. And this is a very important word. It's one of

the translations of the word dharma. Dharma means law, or the nature of things. So our dharma practice is really the investigation of the nature of experience. Mindfulness lets us know what it is that's there. Wisdom investigates that.

One of the things we begin to see through wisdom is that experience doesn't belong to anyone. It's not that there's someone behind this flow of experience to whom it's all happening. Rather, moment after moment, consciousness and its object are flowing along—everything simply expressing its own nature. We could think of it as nature unfolding. That's what's happening.

But as we all know, there's a very strong tendency, a tendency of delusion, to personalize this experience. "This is happening to me." It's always delusion, but sometimes it's even more inappropriately deluded than other times.

I'll give one example. This is a story from Ajahn Chah, who was a great teacher of the Thai forest tradition. It's from a book of his teachings. He was off on retreat in a little meditation hut outside of one of the villages where he had one of his monasteries. The villagers, who were all his students, knew that he was going off on retreat, and they were providing for his needs. But one night he's meditating in his hut and he hears all this loud music coming through loudspeakers from the village. Loudspeakers are very predominant in Asia, especially out in the countryside. So this loud, loud music is blaring.

He got very irritated. "Don't they know I'm here? I'm their teacher and they know I'm meditating, they know I'm on retreat—why are they making so much noise?" You can just imagine. It's not an unfamiliar train of thought. It's easy to imagine what it would be.

But then, because he was Ajahn Chah, he didn't just stay lost in that reactivity of mind. He began to investigate. He brought wisdom to bear on what was happening. And this was his wisdom conclusion: "Well, they're just having a good time down there. I'm making myself miserable up here. No matter how upset I get, my anger is just making more noise internally."

Then he had this insight: the sound is just the sound. It's me who is going out to annoy it. If I leave the sound alone, it won't annoy me. It's just doing what it has to do. That's what sound does—it makes sound. That is its job. So if I don't go out and bother the sound, it's not going to bother me.

It's so down to earth and yet so profound. It's just seeing the nature of things. That's the nature of sound, to make sound. If our minds don't bother it, it won't bother us.

Just as we can investigate experiences the way Ajahn Chah did with sound, we can bring that same wisdom mind to investigate everything that's arising within us. A very fruitful arena to investigate, to bring wisdom to, is the arena of physical sensations that we feel.

This is a big part of our practice. As we sit and walk and go through the day, there are many sensations felt. We feel a sensation and become mindful of it—that's the first step. We're not just being carried away and lost in what's happening. We become mindful of a particular sensation. But then we can look further. We can use our wisdom to investigate: what is it? What is the nature of this sensation? And if it's an uncomfortable one or a painful one, we can investigate what this pain is about, because pain or discomfort can signify different things.

If you put your hand in fire, you don't want to just be noting "burning, burning, burning." There's no wisdom in that. You may be mindful of the burning, but there's no wisdom. Wisdom recognizes that this particular sensation is a danger signal. This is telling me something: take the hand out of the fire. That's the working of wisdom.

Sometimes we might begin to understand different pain or discomfort in the body as the unwinding of accumulated tensions. We all come here—I don't think there's anybody that arrives with a body completely free of tension. Maybe, but not too many. Just because of the busyness and stress of our lives, we accumulate tension. So we come here and begin to feel discomfort and pain. If we can bring wisdom to it rather than just be lost in reactivity, we understand: this is tension. And through awareness, through mindfulness, we can actually let it unwind. That is the de-stressing that is going on. We make the space for it to unwind.

Sometimes we might bring wisdom to experiences of discomfort and through that investigation recognize: this is arising because I'm efforting too much. I'm over-striving and getting tight in doing it. This is something we want to know, we want to understand. All of this is the wisdom mind.

Sometimes unpleasant sensations happen at particular stages of insight. As we go through stages of insight, some are characterized by pleasant sensations, some by unpleasant. That's just what happens in those phases of practice. That's another way of understanding it.

Wisdom doesn't stop just with an understanding of the sensations. Wisdom can also look at the attitude in our mind about the sensation. This gets quite interesting. We're sitting and walking, going through the day, and particularly with uncomfortable sensations—how are we relating to them? Some very common attitudes in the mind with regard to pain or discomfort might be fear.

We might begin to feel some pain, and even if it's okay right now, the thought comes: "What's this going to be like in half an hour?" We just anticipate. In our minds, we anticipate it growing worse and worse and worse, and we get more and more afraid. That becomes the way we're relating.

Or it might be self-pity. "Everybody is sitting in bliss. I'm the only one sitting in pain." And then we just start feeling really sorry for ourselves.

Or avoidance. There's a great meditative technique called the sidelong glance—we're kind of mindful out of the corner of our eye, pretending the discomfort isn't there.

Or it could be downright aversion. We don't like it. It's unpleasant. It's painful. We want it to go away.

Although we may usually be aware of the sensations themselves, very often we're unaware of the attitudes in our minds about them. That's why it's so helpful to ask that question periodically—in the sitting, in the walking, throughout the day—just check in: "What's the attitude in my mind about this?" Because it will reveal aspects of what's going on that may very well have gone unnoticed.

There's a very good feedback mechanism, a kind of mindfulness bell to wake us up when we know something's going on but can't quite figure it out, when we don't understand our attitude and we're just kind of lost. The feedback that is so helpful and very obvious is the feeling of struggle.

You know how sometimes in the walking or the sitting it's just not flowing? You have that sense of struggling in the practice. That sense of struggle is an important piece of information. When you become aware that you're struggling, it always signifies one thing: the feeling of struggle always signifies that something is going on that we're not accepting. Because if we were accepting it, we wouldn't be struggling.

This is very useful. The feeling of struggle is usually obvious. Rather than just drowning in it, take it as valuable feedback. There's a very effective and simple technique here. We become aware that we're struggling—this is the wisdom mind coming in. Wisdom understands: struggle means something is arising that I'm not accepting.

So the technique is simple. It's as if we just sit back, open up, and ask the question: "Okay, what's happening?" We open ourselves to what's happening. And it's very interesting to see the different kinds of things that we may not have noticed—things we're not accepting.

Usually with strong pain, we're aware. But it might be subtle levels of discomfort that we're not open to, not accepting, not even aware of. Yet it's creating that sense of struggle because we haven't opened to it.

It might be an unpleasant mood. Maybe you're feeling bored or depressed or low in energy. If we're not accepting of that, there's going to be a struggle. Struggle means non-acceptance. We can open to it: "Oh, this is boredom, this is depression, this is whatever it is."

Sometimes the struggle comes when there's a whole run of thoughts, just thinking, thinking, thinking, thinking—and we're not accepting of that. So then we get into a struggle.

Is this clear? Struggle means non-acceptance. It has been so helpful to me in my practice to realize this, because right in that moment we have the chance to see what we're not opening to. It's so simple.

As we open to all of these different things, it's wisdom which is then able to see clearly: pain is like this, fear is like this, restless mind is like this.

We're simply seeing the nature of whatever presents itself. There is no problem. We're open to the whole range.

But very often people feel discouraged or impatient when the realization dawns—and it usually dawns pretty early in a retreat—that meditation is not all bliss. What's interesting, and this is true for very experienced meditators as well as for people just beginning, is how astounding the depth of this conditioning is. How often do we measure and evaluate our sittings in the context of pleasant is good, unpleasant is bad?

Let's say you're at home and you have a sitting where the body is light, the mind is concentrated, there are nice feelings. You get up, somebody asks you, "How was your sitting?" "Oh, great sitting today." And maybe you have a sitting full of pain and restlessness and boredom. You get up, "How was your sitting?" "Oh, terrible sitting today." We all do this. It is so deeply imprinted: pleasant is good, unpleasant is bad. Wrong. This is not right view. We have to get this one very deeply. Coming to know the truth of what's actually happening, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, is the deepening of our practice.

Sayadaw Tejaniya has a few great lines about this. He says, "You have to accept and watch both pleasant and unpleasant experiences. You only want pleasant experience. You don't want even the tiniest unpleasant experience. Is this fair? Is this the way of the Dharma?"

So please be aware of this. Dharma practice is to see the nature of what is arising in the moment. Sometimes it's pleasant, sometimes it's unpleasant, and to a large extent that's outside of our control.

When we bring wisdom to investigate and understand the different sensations in the body, it can also lead, in an unusual way, to a deepening and freeing understanding of the nature of consciousness. The awareness of sensations themselves reveals something about the nature of consciousness. I had a very dramatic experience of this, so I'll share this little story with you.

This was a few years ago, maybe three years or so. It was January, and I had gone down to the Caribbean for a week's vacation with friends. It was beautiful—about seventy-five degrees, balmy breeze, visually stunning, the scents of the flowers delicious. Everything was completely agreeable. Then after a week down there, I flew back. This is January in Barre. It was a particularly cold spell. It was twenty below zero, freezing. I stepped outside and it was like ice hitting the skin.

My first hit was, "This is unpleasant. That was pleasant." It was so unavoidable. But then—and this is what I love about New England winters; I'm one of the few people who actually like them—the intensity itself inspires investigation if one has any Dharma background at all. What is this experience that is so intense and sometimes so unpleasant?

Right in that moment, I just became aware of the knowing mind. It was so cold, twenty below zero and icy, and I became mindful of the knowing mind. Oh, it's consciousness, which is knowingness. In that investigation, it was really interesting because I realized that the knowing didn't care whether it was cold or not cold. The knowing simply knows. It's like a mirror that simply reflects what comes in front of it. The mirror doesn't care. It doesn't have preferences.

Just like the mirror reflects everything equally, consciousness simply knows. That's its only function. And it was so interesting to see that the knowing mind can know this very intense unpleasant sensation, and from the perspective of knowing, it's exactly equal to that week in the Caribbean. That was just very interesting to observe about the nature of consciousness.

But then I had the thought, "But it was really nice down there. It was really pleasant." In talking to Sayadaw U Tejaniya about this little story, he had a very apt comment. He said, "That thought—'Oh, but that was really pleasant down there'—that's just the work of feeling. The work of feeling is to taste the pleasantness and unpleasantness of objects." So there's nothing wrong with understanding that that was pleasant, that was unpleasant. It's that feeling tone of the mind. That's the job of feeling. That's the nature of feeling. It tastes whether something is pleasant or unpleasant.

Do you see how it's all just nature at work? Cold colds. Knowing knows. Feeling feels. And this is the investigation of the Dharma. This is the investigation of our lives. What is actually happening? Not our stories, not our reactions—can we bring it all onto the platform of mindfulness? That's essential. We have to be aware of what's happening, and then bring the wisdom mind to bear. We get interested in what it is that's happening.

Just as we become increasingly mindful of the different sensations and our attitudes about them, and the kinds of understanding that can come when we're mindful of the sensations in the body—whether pleasant or unpleasant—we also become much more mindful of all the thoughts and images and attitudes in the mind. We just see over and over again our likes and our dislikes, our judgments and our desires, all these conditioned patterns, these conditioned tendencies of the mind.

We begin to see all the projections we have about other people. Have you noticed just these quick little judgments? Somebody walks by and there's just some little quick judgment. Or sometimes it's whole big stories. We can create a whole drama about somebody, and it's often about people we don't even know. We have no idea really of who they are, but it doesn't stop the mind from creating the story.

Now, what's obvious is that we don't invite all these thoughts. We're not sitting here saying, "Okay, thought, come." They just come by themselves. But through mindfulness, through that great power, we begin to see the difference—the essential difference in our experience—between being lost in a thought and being aware that we're thinking. Right there, you could say, is the key to understanding our minds: the difference between being lost in a thought and being aware that we're thinking.

This again is from U Tejaniya. Please listen carefully because if you get this, it will save you six weeks or three months of dukkha. It's very simple: Don't feel disturbed by the thinking mind. We are not practicing to prevent thinking. What you are practicing is to recognize and acknowledge thinking whenever it arises. We don't have to struggle with the thinking mind. It's just its nature. We want to practice recognizing and being aware that we're thinking. That's all.

In the awareness of thought, we begin to see its true nature. We begin to see its empty nature, its insubstantial nature. And it's all through mindfulness. It's all through paying attention.

I would like to close with a teaching from Ajahn Mun, who was the grandfather of the Thai forest tradition. He was one of these great Thai forest masters, considered by many people to be an arahant, someone of very powerful understanding. There's a wonderful biography of him by one of his main disciples, Ajahn Maha Boowa, who is also considered to be an arahant.

It's the biography of Ajahn Mun, and it's a fantastic story of his life and his attainment. So at some point after the retreat, it's something you might be interested in looking at.

This is from Ajahn Mun:

Of the many things that people value and care for in the world, the mind is the most precious. In fact, the mind is the foremost treasure in the whole world, so be sure to look after it well. To realize the mind's true nature is to realize the Dhamma. Understanding the mind is the same as understanding Dhamma. Once the mind is known, then Dhamma in its entirety is known. Arriving at the truth about one's mind is the attainment of Nibbana. Clearly the mind is a priceless possession that should never be overlooked.

This is our practice. It's really investigating this priceless treasure.

Let's sit for a few minutes.

CHAPTER 7

Morning Instructions: Mindfulness of Vedanā (Feeling Tone)

Joseph Goldstein · 1h01

> *In this morning instruction from the 2007 three-month retreat at IMS, Joseph Goldstein offers practical guidance on incorporating mindfulness of vedanā—the feeling tone of pleasantness, unpleasantness, or neutrality present in every moment of experience. He clarifies that vedanā refers not to emotions but to this elemental quality that "tastes" each experience, explaining why the Buddha singled it out as one of the four foundations of mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna).*
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> *Goldstein illuminates how unnoticed feeling tones trigger our deeply conditioned patterns: clinging to what's pleasant and averting from what's unpleasant. Through mindful awareness of vedanā, we can break this chain of conditioning. He offers the subtle observation that bodily and mental feeling tones can differ—one might experience unpleasant physical sensation alongside pleasant mental feeling when the mind remains balanced and clear. He shares a teaching moment with his teacher Munindraji, who upon hearing of Goldstein's headache said, "I hope you are enjoying it"—pointing to this very possibility.*
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> *The instructions emphasize simplicity: notice feeling tones when predominant, use soft mental noting if helpful, and investigate how mindfulness of vedanā causes grasping and aversion to naturally fall away. Goldstein also addresses the rhythm between focused attention and choiceless awareness, how to work skillfully with aversion by becoming "a scholar of aversion," and the essential role of continuity of awareness throughout daily activities—not just during formal practice.*

Last night I referred briefly to that quality of mind, of feeling, that is the mental factor which tastes the pleasantness or unpleasantness or neutrality of every experience, of every object. In every moment there is a feeling tone. Feeling in this context does not refer to what in English we often call emotions. It means very specifically the pleasantness, unpleasantness, or neutrality that we taste and experience.

This particular elemental factor plays a very critical role in our understanding of the path. The Buddha singled out this factor in making it one of the four foundations of mindfulness: mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of feelings, mindfulness of the mind, and mindfulness of dhammas.

I want to speak very briefly this morning about how to incorporate mindfulness or awareness of this feeling tone in the practice. In the simplest way, you can notice when this feeling tone is very obvious. Something happens and you experience very clearly the pleasantness of it or the unpleasantness of it. When that aspect becomes very predominant, pay attention to it. Recognize it for what it is. It's not that "I'm feeling pleasant" or "I'm feeling unpleasant." Rather, it's the feeling—it's that quality of mind which is expressing its nature. Feeling feels. The feeling tone is that quality of mind that is tasting the pleasantness or unpleasantness. That's the job of feelings. So when we're experiencing very clear pleasantness or unpleasantness, simply recognize: this is feeling, this is pleasant feeling, this is unpleasant feeling.

The reason vedanā plays such a critical role in the path is that the Buddha pointed out that when feeling tones are not noticed, when we're unmindful of them, the habituated, deeply habituated tendency of mind is to cling to what's pleasant, to desire what's pleasant, and to have aversion or dislike of what's unpleasant. For most of us, that's the default position. Something pleasant comes, we want it, we like it. Something unpleasant comes, we don't like it. So it takes mindfulness, it takes awareness of the feeling tone to break that pattern of conditioning.

It's quite interesting to observe the mind and the experience when you're aware of the feeling tone versus when you're not. For example, when there's something that's quite pleasant and you become mindful—pleasant feeling, pleasantness—notice the quality of mind in that moment of being mindful. When we're just acknowledging, "Yes, this is pleasant," you will see that in that moment of mindfulness of the pleasantness, we're not pushing it away. We're mindful of it, we're aware of the pleasantness, but in being mindful, you may notice that in that very moment there is no desire, there is no grasping. There is the simple experience of and acknowledgement of pleasant. And so the mind remains free of that conditioning to grasp.

Likewise with unpleasant feelings. If there's unpleasant sensations in the body or unpleasant emotions, unpleasant mind states, notice the tendency of the mind, the habitual tendency. Something unpleasant comes, immediate reaction of aversion, not liking, wanting to get rid of. This can be a very obvious movement of mind, or it can be a subtle level of contraction. Notice the habitual tendency of the mind to react to unpleasantness with aversion.

Then investigate. Really look at the mind in those moments when we're mindful of the unpleasant feeling. This is unpleasant. It's feeling, this feeling quality of mind which is tasting the unpleasantness of the object. And it's just doing its function. Feeling feels. Notice the quality of the mind when you're aware of this unpleasant feeling.

Here a note might be helpful, especially in the beginning as you're exploring. Maybe just a very soft note: "Unpleasant, unpleasant." And you may see that in that moment of awareness, we're experiencing the unpleasantness, but there's no aversion. There's no pushing it away. It's the simple acknowledgement: this is how it is right now.

As we explore this and investigate this with the wisdom mind, we begin to understand a very deep pattern of conditioning within ourselves that has tremendous implications for how we live our lives. We taste, we experience, in a very non-conceptual way, the possibility of freedom—where we're allowing these feeling tones to arise. They're coming by themselves. We're not inviting them. We allow them to arise, and with mindfulness, with awareness, they're no longer conditioning the patterns of grasping or aversion.

There's one little subtlety you might want to explore as well. Notice that there could be an unpleasant bodily sensation—some pain, discomfort in the body—and we feel it as unpleasant, but depending on the quality of the mind, there might be a pleasant mental feeling associated with the unpleasant bodily sensation. Notice the difference. There's unpleasant physical sensation, and then there may be aversion, dislike, self-pity, fear—all those things I mentioned last night—in the mind.

On the other hand, there might be pain in the body, discomfort in the body, and we're simply mindful of it. The mind is getting concentrated, clear, open, calm. There could be unpleasant physical sensation and quite pleasant mental feeling. It's interesting to explore this.

At one point I was in India practicing with Munindraji. I was just in the bazaar with him, and that particular day I had a bad headache. I was telling him about it as we were talking, and he turned to me and said, "Oh, I hope you are enjoying it." At the time, of course, I didn't quite know what he meant. But with practice, we begin to see that possibility. There can be that pleasant mental feeling with unpleasant physical sensation if the mind is in a state of balance—if the mind is open, clear, calm, concentrated.

You don't have to think too much about all this. In fact, it would be advisable not to. Just let these words be like seeds in the mind, in the practice. Stay attuned to this feeling tone as it arises, whether it's in the body or in the mind. Begin at times to recognize it for what it is: feeling, tasting the pleasantness or unpleasantness of a particular experience—a sound, a sight, a sensation, a thought, an emotion. Is it pleasant? Is it unpleasant? Notice it, particularly when it's predominant.

At times you can also investigate. If you find the mind is particularly reactive to something—if you become aware of strong aversion or strong grasping—as you become mindful of that and you have the interest to investigate, look a little deeper and see if in fact those reactions are the response to a feeling tone. See what happens if you then become mindful: "Oh, pleasant, pleasant." See if the grasping falls away as you become mindful of the pleasant. Or if there's strong aversion or resistance or dislike in the mind, and you become aware of that reaction, again investigate at times: is there something unpleasant that's conditioning that aversion? See what happens when you become mindful of the unpleasant feeling. "Oh, unpleasant, unpleasant." In that very moment, does the aversion fall away?

All of this is part of the ongoing exploration of our conditioning. The basic guideline for the practice is to keep it simple. Don't let all of this be a cause of confusion. Just let the words settle in and they will come at the appropriate time in your practice.

Sit and know you're sitting—very simply, relaxed, open, aware of whatever presents itself moment after moment. It can be sound. Notice how effortlessly the sound is known. It can be the sensations in the body, it can be the breath. Notice how effortlessly they are known. Experience is presenting itself moment after moment. Simply settle back and be aware of what's arising. Be aware of thoughts, images, different mind states. And if at times it's helpful, you can stay or rest on one object like the breath or sensations or sound as a way of stabilizing the awareness.

When you hear the bell, just be with the experience of hearing—the sound being known. Notice how effortlessly it's known. And be with the very impermanence of the vibration of the sound. It's interesting that when we're hearing a sound, it's so clear and obvious that it comes into being and then it vibrates—that flow of changing vibrations—and then it fades away into nothing. It's so easy and simple to be aware of that with a sound.

And really, everything is like that. We can have that same ease of awareness of just objects, experience arising, doing their thing for some time, fading away, and something else arising. Sometimes it's happening very quickly, and sometimes we may see it over a period of time. But if you're ever wondering what all this is about and what you're supposed to be doing, you might just think of the bell.

I sometimes think it might be helpful just to sit for the hour and ring the bell again and again. Because it so easily puts the mind into that quality of receptive awareness where we're seeing the impermanent flow of things. There's very little tendency of the mind to grasp at the sound. You're not trying to make it stay. You're not trying to push it

away. It's so simple. And so everything—the sensations, the thoughts, the emotions—are just like that. The training, in a way, is this: Can we place our awareness in the same relationship to everything else as it is to the sound of the bell?

There are times, for a variety of reasons, when focusing on a single object becomes helpful. Sometimes the formlessness of choiceless awareness, where we're just resting in that openness with many different changing objects—depending on one's background and ability to stay with that—at some point it may feel like the mind is getting too scattered, getting lost in everything that's arising. There's not that sense of stability as with the sound, where it's so easy to stay present.

If you feel like you're getting lost or scattered and it's difficult to be in that open choiceless space, it's very helpful to spend some time just resting in one object to stabilize that quality of attention. Sometimes focusing on a single object helps in terms of sharpening the mind—it's like sharpening the blade of a knife. By keeping the mind on a single object, the quality of attention can get more precise. Sometimes it helps as a way of raising the energy. You may have noticed that at times, in this very open, choiceless way, it's really sharp and stable for a while, and then maybe the energy starts to dissipate. Bringing the mind back to a particular object to rest on takes effort, a certain quality of effort in the mind. And the effort creates energy. Just like when you're tired and you go out for a run or some exercise, the very effort to do the exercise brings energy. It's the same thing in the practice. In all these ways, focusing can be helpful.

On the other hand, we don't want the mind to become tight or fixated in a heavy focus. That's why the emphasis has been in the instructions to just sit and be with what's arising, so we learn about the other side—openness, receptivity, just being there as things present themselves.

I see the practice as a very intuitive rhythm between the two. It's not that one is right and one is wrong. They're just developing the mind, or aspects of the mind, in different ways. At different times, different approaches are helpful. And it's really for you to discover for yourselves: When is it good to stay resting on a single object? When is it good to open and be in that more choiceless mode? Don't make one into right and one into wrong, because they're part of a whole. All these aspects are part of a whole.

As I said in the beginning, you want to keep it simple. Well, it's the mind that's not simple. The basic rule for practice is to be with what's predominant. That's always the easiest because what's predominant is what's calling our attention. So if you come here and there's a lot of agitation, or a lot of fear, or a lot of whatever, and that's the predominant experience, that's what you should be paying attention to. You're open to the ex-

perience: fear feels like this, agitation feels like this. You're just taking what is actually presenting itself. You don't have to look for anything special. You don't have to strive for any great subtlety. This is the predominant experience—let me be with it.

As you're with what's predominant—it might be agitation in the body, it could be agitation in the mind—first you recognize it. You become mindful of it, which is an important step out of being lost in it. You're actually mindful: this is what's here now, this is what's predominant.

Already you're freeing the mind from identification with it. Even though those are the states that are there, to the degree that you're mindful of them, it's fine. There's no problem. You're not lost in it anymore.

Then, from that platform of mindfulness—of those very states that are so predominant—from that platform of mindfulness, you might then ask the question: what's the attitude in the mind about them? That's all. Keep it just to that. And you look to see: is there openness? Is there acceptance? Is there aversion to it? That's all. Just that.

How many of you feel aversion in your practice? So I would like to make a recommendation to those of you who have this mind state arise: become an expert in aversion. Become a scholar of aversion. Get your PhD in aversion.

Aversion is arising. As you can see, it's a very predominant conditioning in our minds. We don't want to be struggling with it. We want to learn about it. Aversion is there. This is very deeply conditioned. It comes up a lot. Instead of fighting with it, instead of struggling with it, instead of getting into a whole hassle—oh, aversion—what is aversion like? What is its nature? It's not "I'm feeling aversion." It's aversion is aversioning. It's just that mind state doing its thing. Can we learn about it? It presents itself—fine. This is our chance to learn about aversion. Really explore. What is this experience like?

Then I'll give you just a little clue of what happens over time. Don't expect immediate results, but over time: when you're holding a hot coal, do you have to convince yourself to let go? Probably not. As we experience the quality of aversion in the mind, as we really get to learn it and are not getting lost in our habitual reactions to it, as we learn it and feel it and really see what it's like, it's let go of quite naturally—because it's suffering. So just let that happen. Let that happen from the wisdom of seeing it clearly.

There was a question about karma and who's owning it from life to life. I think we'll postpone that question. At some point one of us will give a talk on karma because it's important and it's an interesting question, one that comes up a lot. Basically, the question is: how do you reconcile the teachings of karma—of cause and effect, whether it's

within one lifetime or from life to life—with the understanding of selflessness? If there's no one there behind the process, who is it that experiences karmic results? That question comes up a lot, so at some point we'll address it.

I want to say just one thing about what continuity means. Especially with this attitude of a more open awareness, where we're just with experience as it's presenting itself moment after moment, the way concentration develops in this style of practice is precisely through continuity. And so this continuity of awareness is an essential aspect of the practice. It doesn't mean forcing.

It doesn't mean tightening. It can be very easeful. It's almost like a dance, or like tai chi, where we're just going through the day receptive—receiving what it is that's arising. It can be the feeling of a step, or a sound, or a sight, whatever it is. But there is a real continuity at work.

What continuity means in this respect is—and you have to hear this in the right way—it means every step. It means every movement. It's just very interesting to observe, especially in times when there's a mass migration from the dining room into the hall for a sitting, or after a sitting when going to a walking space. You can just see where the mind falls into that black lab consciousness, where the quality of attention is just not the same as when you're doing walking meditation or in the sitting.

Continuity means bringing that quality of caring attention to standing, to turning, to walking. And it doesn't mean always creeping along—you can be doing this at any speed. It's a question of whether one is settled back in the body and really attentive, easefully. It's not struggling. It's just there. It's being present. Or whether we're just getting to where we're going.

So watch the difference, and see if you can really cultivate this. It becomes a practice, and it becomes a habit after a while—this very easeful continuity through the day. And it feels great. It feels like, yes, I'm really being present.

So just play with that. Have a mindful day.

CHAPTER 8

The View That Supports Understanding

Myoshin Kelley · 56 min

> *In this heartfelt talk from the three-month retreat at IMS, Myoshin Kelley begins by reflecting on the sorrow evoked by world events and the profound importance of the inner work practitioners undertake to understand the roots of suffering. She continues Joseph Goldstein's exploration of wisdom by examining right view (sammā diṭṭhi) as both the beginning and culmination of the Noble Eightfold Path.*
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> *Kelley distinguishes three types of wisdom in the Buddhist tradition: sutta mayā paññā (wisdom from hearing teachings), cintā mayā paññā (wisdom from reflection and application), and bhāvanā mayā paññā (intuitive wisdom arising from meditation). She explains how perceptual distortions lead to distorted thoughts and eventually solidified views, using vivid examples to illustrate how misperception shapes our experience and relationships.*
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> *The talk provides an accessible framework for understanding kamma (karma) as the law of cause and effect, emphasizing our capacity to plant wholesome seeds through skillful action. Kelley touches on the Four Noble Truths—dukkha, its arising through craving, its cessation, and the path leading to that cessation—as the framework for liberating insight. Drawing on teachings from Sayadaw U Tejaniya and poetry from the 13th-century Chinese Buddhist nun Miaoshan, she encourages practitioners to look directly at experience rather than through habitual filters, allowing wisdom to deepen naturally through sustained practice.*

I want to begin tonight by just saying what's foremost in my heart this evening. And that is a deep appreciation for the work that you're all doing here.

I've had a couple of days where the events of the world—and this is not some catastrophic thing that's happened, but the ongoing current events of the world—have just really been saddening me. And then, you know, receiving appeals in the mail from all different kinds of organizations. Usually a couple times a year, I'll either collect them or as they come in, realize I just can't give to everybody. But when I would receive them, both through the mail and email, it was like every time I looked, it just spoke to my heart—something else that was calling upon me to give to what's a very worthy cause.

And it just caused me to reflect on the world we live in, the level of delusion in the world, the level of ignorance, unwise actions. And just the knowing that it's hard to see in the world what's helpful, what's useful.

Then I just so appreciate the fact that we are gathered here really to look so deeply into the roots of suffering, the cause of suffering. That we're pulled here by that movement of the heart to alleviate the pain. For me today, there were so many tender moments of that—that if I didn't feel like I was doing this work, I would probably feel broken by it, knowing that it would be too much to bear. But knowing what we're doing, having some inkling of what's possible, helps me to be with it. It helps me to realize that on every level in life I can only do the best that I can, but that there is this necessity to do this work, to look deeply.

Last night, Joseph ended the last part of his talk by speaking about wisdom. And I wanted to continue speaking about wisdom this evening. In particular tonight, speaking about wisdom by way of right view and some of the things the Buddha pointed to.

The wisdom aspect of this practice is so important. It really distinguishes it. And in my own experience, I have to say that the taste of wisdom is like no other taste. The taste of seeing clearly. The taste of deepening understanding. And in our lives we have moments of this, and probably those moments where we had some sniff of the truth is a part of what brought us here.

The path of wisdom is the path that we're following through this meditation practice that we're doing. It's a way of deepening our understanding. And as Joseph said last night, right view is where we are able to see things in their nature as they are. And this is what our practice helps us to do.

This practice is insight meditation, where we have insight into the three characteristics that are common to all experience—that these experiences are all impermanent in their nature, that they're all unsatisfactory due to their impermanence, that they're not lasting, that we can't find happiness in the experiences, and that they're all insubstantial. This is what we come to see, and in the seeing, understand more clearly the causes of suffering. And in understanding the causes of suffering, we stop acting in ways that perpetuate the pain, the distress, and rest in the way things are.

The path as the Buddha laid it out both begins and ends with wisdom. This is when he was speaking about what's called the Noble Eightfold Path. I'm just briefly going to mention the eight factors—I'm not going into the different aspects of the Eightfold Path tonight—but it's right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The wisdom aspect of this path is right view, or right understanding, and right intention.

It always interested me that the Buddha said the path begins with this. But I can see there are a couple of good reasons why this is so. In order to follow this path, there has to be a glimmer of wisdom—somewhere we've tasted of the sense of possibility, where we have some enough inspiration to begin to move on the journey, to want to, to aspire to wake up. So we need to have some small voice of wisdom in there to begin the journey.

But the Buddha also, by beginning with right view, was speaking to the fact that it's helpful to have a context for the work that we're doing here. This is a different kind of wisdom.

And just to say that in the teachings there are three kinds of wisdom. The first is *sutta maya pañña*, which is information that we gather. We hear the teachings, we get instruction, and this is a type of wisdom. This is a type of information, because it's going to be really helpful to us if we get information that is correct, that is useful. Coming to a retreat, receiving dharma talks and instructions—this is all a way that we're gathering this information.

And then you've probably noticed as you sit there that this information is with you. It could be the voice in the back of the mind saying, "Why don't you try this?" Or it might be giving some perspective to what you're doing. An example of this would be how we keep talking about seeing things in their nature rather than seeing something as being mine. There's a difference between experiencing fear and seeing the nature of fear—the way the mind is when fear is present—versus what's happening when it's the story about *my* fear and the thoughts are perpetuating it. Sometimes when we're really caught in the fear, if we remember this piece of information—see it in its nature, see it as it is, knowing this is just fear, this is the nature of fear—this information that we then process, digest, and examine in our own experience becomes another level of wisdom, which is called *cintā maya pañña*, where we're actually applying what we've heard.

And then we keep applying what we've heard, and we find at some point that there's direct experience and the understanding that comes from it. This is *bhāvanā maya pañña*. This is an intuitive wisdom that we can't force, that we can't make happen. But it comes about through this steadiness of mind, this application of mindfulness. And out of that comes a deepening wisdom.

So tonight in my talk, much of what I'm going to be speaking about is really on the level of giving you some information, some aspects of right view that the Buddha pointed to. I often get this picture of the Buddha sitting at the top of the mountain, having

climbed to the top of the mountain. He knows the potential of the journey, what's possible as human beings. And sitting there, he can view the terrain, and he points to what needs to be seen in order to free the mind.

He's a very pragmatic teacher. He pointed toward what is useful for us—what is useful for us who are sitting at the bottom of the mountain and don't often see so clearly. Because we have habits of misperception, habits where we're just moved in habituated ways and can't always distinguish what the truth is.

He explained that there are levels of distortion that happen. It's not because we're bad, horrible beings that we don't see clearly, but simply because we don't have the steadiness of mind to recognize things as they are. He said we experience distortion by way of distortion of perception, by way of distortion of thoughts, and distortion of views.

This first piece, distortion of perception, is where there's some experience through any of the sense doors and it's not seen clearly, yet we believe that whatever we saw is the way things are and live as if that's true. We see it in many different ways.

I had an experience on retreat once where I was sharing a room with a friend. It was a very tiny room, and there was only enough space that if I was getting dressed and she needed to go to the bathroom, I had to move out of her way. One day this was happening—she wanted to go to the bathroom, I moved out of her way, and I'm getting dressed, practicing mindfulness as best I can. She goes into the bathroom, and I know she's gone into the bathroom.

Then a few minutes later, all of a sudden, I see something—it's like seeing something out of the corner of your eye. It was jarring in the seeing of it. And then in the next moment, there's the seeing of a bald head. And then in the next moment, fear arose really strongly, and there's the thought, "It's an alien. It's an alien."

A moment before, I had been alone. My friend had gone into the bathroom. She was a nun, so she had a shaved head. But in that moment of misperception, there was fear, panic, and it all started to perpetuate.

We have many moments of misperception in our lives. Walking outside at night, constantly coming over here tonight—just moments of misperception.

There was a thump in the woods beside me. First there was simply the hearing, and then this whole flurry of possible interpretations arose. Then I realized it was just something falling from a tree. But in these moments of misperception, we can have strong reactions. And many times we don't check them out. We don't look. We don't have the stability that we're cultivating to see more clearly.

From these perceptions, thoughts form. And these thoughts, which were based on misperceptions to begin with, we totally believe to be true. Being on retreat is such a wonderful place to explore this. Because our fellow yogis—do we have stories about them? Maybe the odd one. Or maybe it's just me that does it. But we get one piece of information and we make up an entire story about it.

I think Vipassana romance was mentioned earlier—how on retreat we can sometimes experience a strong attraction to somebody. And out of that, we may start to build stories. I had a friend who was once sitting retreat, and during that time she became attracted to another person. At the end of the retreat, she was talking to me about her experience, and she spoke as if she had found her soulmate. She said, "When we would be in close proximity to each other, the vibrations between us would be dancing." He would often sit near where she sat, and it was this complete love affair as they ate together in silence. They both did yoga, and lo and behold, they practiced at the same time. "After tea, I like to go outside," she said, "and he would follow."

She was in a state of enchantment as she told me about it. The sad part was that he had already left the retreat. But she had some stick-with-it-ness. She asked questions, found out who he was, where he lived, discovered his phone number. She called him up and described who she was—the love of his life, his soulmate.

He responded by saying, "Oh, I think I vaguely remember who you are."

But she had this whole story going. It's sad, isn't it? And how much do we do this in our lives? We make up stories about everything. They're based on misperception, on not seeing clearly. And then we live as if they are true. These thoughts, which were not based on truth, start to solidify even more. They become our views, our opinions about how things are.

I'd like to share a story that I think is classic in describing this aspect of views. This is an actual transcript of a radio conversation between a U.S. naval ship and the Canadian authorities off the coast of Newfoundland in October 1995.

Americans: "Please divert your course fifteen degrees to the north to avoid a collision."

Canadians: "Recommend that you divert your course fifteen degrees to the south to avoid a collision."

Americans: "This is the captain of a U.S. Navy ship. I say again, divert your course."

Canadians: "No, I say again, you divert your course."

Americans: "This is the aircraft carrier USS Lincoln, the second largest ship in the United States Atlantic Fleet. We are accompanied by three destroyers, three cruisers, and numerous support vessels. I demand that you change your course fifteen degrees north—that's one-five degrees north—or countermeasures will be undertaken to ensure the safety of this ship."

Canadians: "This is a lighthouse. Your call."

Wars happen from attachment to views which are based on distorted perceptions—these habits that have solidified until we become bound in them. The Buddha said that because of these distortions, we take what is impermanent to be permanent, what is unsatisfactory to be satisfactory, what is not self to be self, and what is unlovely to be lovely.

So, if we have this tendency towards misperception, we need to look towards what will help us see clearly. So far in the retreat, we've been giving many instructions and information to help us do this. But tonight I wanted to speak about two aspects of right view that the Buddha spoke about.

He said it was really helpful to come to understand karma, the laws of cause and effect. This is not the promised karma talk—I'm just going to be touching upon it tonight—because it is something that we can look to over and over again in our experience. It becomes so clear through practicing. If we have some framework for understanding it in a simple way, that can be immensely helpful.

I am not one of the great intellectual scholars of this time. What I have learned mostly comes from my practice, and so I can only speak of it in very simple terms. Karma has many layers to it, complexities to it. But in my own experience, it has been so immensely helpful to just really begin to see the cause and effect at work in my mind. Just as simple as seeing when anger is present, the effect of it. When that anger is fed, the effect of it. When loving-kindness is in the mind, the effect of it. It's like it's just greeting us as we sit here. But if we've never heard of it, it might take a while to really understand that's what's being seen.

So the law of karma—karma literally means action. Technically, it means volitional action. It's where what we do, what we say, has an effect. There's an impact. It plants seeds out of which further conditions will arise.

I heard the saying once about karma that it means you don't get away with anything. On one level, it's really true—we don't get away with anything. But I think that can have a connotation that's a little bit negative. For myself, when I first heard about karma, I thought it was going to be where all of the bad things I ever did in my life came back to me. I didn't reflect on the wholesome. Karma was bad news. And yet there's wholesome karma. So it's really just this understanding that how we meet life in this moment has consequences.

If somebody comes and vents their anger on us and we vent right back, that's going to have consequences. When we meet life with a heart of generosity, that too has consequences. If you think of somebody you know who just by their nature is very generous—the atmosphere that is around them, that people tend to trust them, people are at ease around them, it's easy to be with them—there's an effect from it.

We find that there's wholesome karma, or wholesome actions, wholesome volition. That is where the action is skillful, helpful on the journey of awakening, spiritually beneficial, and it ripens as happiness and good fortune.

And then there's unwholesome karma—actions which lead to more suffering. They're unskillful, cause pain to ourselves or others, are rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion, and they ripen as states of anger, jealousy, frustration, laziness.

We have a choice in our life as to what seeds we plant. The results of past actions will ripen when conditions are right, and that we don't have control over. But in a moment where anger is arising in us—which can be a result of unwholesome past actions—we could sit there and get really judgmental of ourselves. "Oh, look at you, idiot. You must have done something really bad in the past, and this is what's happening to you now." But is that helpful? No, it's not helpful. But if we sit by way of not being victim to anger, but facing anger, looking to what can be understood, how this can be known in a helpful way, we're not perpetuating those seeds.

There's an old Cherokee story. One evening, an old Cherokee was telling his grandson about a battle that was going on inside him. He said, "My son, it is between two wolves. One is evil—anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is good—joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith."

The grandson thought about this for a moment, and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf wins?"

The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one I feed."

If we feed our habits of anger, jealousy, pride—this is what will win. This is what we'll see the effect of in our lives. We can see it clearly on a day when we so-called get up out of bed on the wrong side, where aversion is present. And instead of being mindful of it, we feed it. Everywhere we go, that aversion hits us in the face. Or we can feed the seeds of loving-kindness, generosity, wisdom.

We can really develop a sense of how karma works through working with the precepts, living the precepts. The very immediate thing that becomes quite knowable very quickly in practice is that we see the results of our past actions when we sit down in silence—the memories that come back. If we did things we don't feel good about, they will often repeatedly arise in the mind. If we're not mindful, this will lead us into guilt, feeling horrible about ourselves. But if we have been living life skillfully, as we sit down, we sit down with the joy of virtue, and the mind finds it easy to collect itself. It's not continually replaying these tapes.

Just to say that if we are sitting here and having a lot of memories from the past come up, this is where we can really plant the wholesome seeds—in having that willingness to acknowledge, see, and feel in this moment the impact of that memory, without perpetuating the story, but just allowing whatever needs to be felt to be there.

There's a dog that's been in my life. His name is Max. Max was bred from a pit bull and a bull mastiff. In meeting Max, being around him, I came to see something of what the karma of having pit bull genetics may be—where it tends to be that when he's backed into a corner, he moves into aggression. It's almost like it's in his cells.

What I noticed with Max is that one day I was out walking, down around the back of the loop, and sometimes they shift cow manure from one field to another, dropping it all along the road. Max had this great taste for cow manure. He loved to eat it. And Max would also then like to turn around and kiss me, as dogs do, and he had a huge tongue. So you can imagine this was not such an exciting proposal. Besides, just the thought of what he was eating was a bit strong for me. So I was trying to get him to stop, and I kept telling him, "No, no, no." But he wasn't listening. A pit bull can fixate on something, and they just want what they want. And then finally I just hit him. I whacked him, and he bit me. At first it wasn't a bad bite—he just put his teeth around my hand.

It was shocking. But then I did reflect on how I had hit him first. It took me a while to realize that.

What was interesting to me about Max was that this was how he would react when backed into a corner. But then he would go into remorse. He would feel bad about what he did. Having watched Max do this a number of times, and now he's much older—very old in fact—I really have the sense that he has worked through this pattern. I don't know, I could be really projecting here. Which it sounds like I might be. But he's not prone to it in the same way.

It's like we have these habits—our past karma ripening, not always in the way that we like. But if we pay attention, if we look, understanding can come. Just in the moment of mindfulness, we can see something of the effects. In the moment when anger is really strong in the mind and it's recognized, mindfulness has a coolness to it—that coolness that comes from clear seeing. I've seen, when I've been in a heated argument and I just had that one moment of recognition, for that moment the whole momentum of the anger is stopped. There's a coolness.

So it's really through our practice, looking to see cause and effect. Not looking by figuring out, but allowing it to reveal itself as we look. It can be seen.

I have found the understanding of karma to be very empowering. And this is not just because of the sense of having a deepening understanding of planting wholesome seeds—though that's really helpful. It's also that in moments where I've done something that was not based in wisdom, something done out of the habituated mind, not seeing clearly, just in the recognition of that, I realize that I am responsible for my own karma. This is a seat I can sit in. I can take this seat.

One time I said something publicly that I felt was really unskillful.

Actually, somebody pointed out to me that it was unskillful. And then I went, okay, it's unskillful. Then I recognized it. And it was really hard to be with until the phrase of equanimity came to me: all beings are owners of their own karma. With that, there was a sense of empowerment. Okay, I will live with the consequences, but I will learn.

It's so different when we have this desire, this interest in learning from whatever happens. I always have my own definition of karma—it's this personalized package of wake-up pills. The lessons in life we need to learn come to us as a result of past actions.

There's something very freeing, too, in the aspect of it being cause and effect. Things are unfolding according to natural laws. The peace that's so freeing in this is the peace that sometimes people are fearful of—that there is this selflessness in that there's no solid I, me, mine that this is all referring back to, but that causes and conditions are governed by laws and unfolding according to those laws. And with that, this selflessness

doesn't mean that everything is chaotic, random. There are laws governing it. And karma is one of these laws governing that unfolding. It's a lawful process. It's nature. Nature unfolding.

Understanding karma really helps us to pay attention to what we do, what we say, how we live. Because these are the laws that govern the world in which we live. This is from a sutra called "The Wise and the Foolish": *Do not take lightly small misdeeds, believing they can do no harm. Even a tiny spark of fire can set alight a mountain of hay.* Even the smallest acts can bring great benefit. So both with misdeeds and great acts, they can have consequences. Taking care, looking, and understanding this law in our own experience.

The Buddha also talked about right view as being the realization in our own experience, our own understanding of the Four Noble Truths—that this understanding of these truths leads to liberation. This is not a full talk on the Four Noble Truths, of course, but just touching on them. I'm giving this information as a framework, that part of wisdom that gives context, so we have some idea of what we're looking into, why we're sitting with suffering.

Why would anybody want to do this? Earlier in my life, I chose the path of celebration. I thought, we're having life, don't we want to rejoice? But I didn't understand that one needed to look deeply into suffering to find true happiness. It was that understanding that would unbind the heart. Without that deep understanding, happiness is only temporary. It's only a state of joy, a state of happiness. The real peace comes from understanding.

So just briefly, the Four Noble Truths. The first truth is the truth of suffering—that there is suffering, that there are unsavory aspects to this experience of mind and body. In my younger life, I was kind of brought up in the Barbie doll culture, where there was always this happy face given to life, where suffering was denied, not seen. Out of that, what happens is that when we hit something where there is suffering in our life—which can come about through the aging process, through sickness, through encounters with death—when we hit that, if we don't understand the truth of suffering, we think we've done something wrong. We're to blame. We take suffering personally. And that's painful.

So the first noble truth, the truth of suffering, is meant to stop us from taking suffering personally and to help us recognize the unpleasant elements without defining ourselves by them. If every time in our meditation practice we hit unpleasant experience and we define ourselves by it, it becomes miserable, horrible. Whereas, as Joseph

pointed to this morning, we just recognize unpleasant experience as unpleasant experience. We know it as a feeling tone of some experience, and it's not referring back to I, me, mine. There's so much more ease.

The second noble truth is the cause of suffering. The cause of suffering is craving. We see craving in the desire for sense pleasure, the desire to be, the sense of self—I am. And we also find a craving at times not to be. We want to annihilate, get rid of, not to exist anymore. In our practice, we look into craving in all of its forms, to investigate it, to see it, so that we can understand.

I keep saying, as Joseph said... But it's our teacher. Not meaning him—though he is too—but the craving, when it's here. Look. We're so afraid of our suffering, so afraid that it will be overwhelming. And yet it's our teacher. We're looking the wrong way. But looking with that refuge of awareness, of mindfulness—let it speak. Because when we see it clearly, the mind lets go of its own accord. When we understand.

And then there we are, right in the third noble truth: the cessation of suffering. From seeing for ourselves. This is to be realized.

And the fourth noble truth is the Noble Eightfold Path, the path that the Buddha laid out. This is to be developed. This is what we're doing here in our practice.

Right view—in the beginning, we don't have it in our own experience. We don't see clearly. But looking towards these aspects of experience, that's what the Buddha was pointing to. Sitting on top of the mountain, he was trying to point towards what is helpful in our own experience, what we can look toward that will help us see things as they are. Understanding the law of karma. Looking into suffering, the truth of suffering, the cause of suffering.

So in our practice, can we take our seat? Can we look at whatever's meeting us? Look directly. Not through our usual habituated ways of seeing. Not through the thinking about, figuring out, analyzing. But really letting life speak to us. Learning. Listening. Letting that wisdom deepen of its own accord.

I'd like to share a teaching from Sayadaw U Tejaniya: "Once you truly understand the benefits of the practice, you will never stop practicing. You will always keep going wherever you are. When you are really able to apply the Dharma in your life and start seeing the difference it makes, then the qualities of the Dharma will become obvious. The qualities of the Dharma will come alive for you. They will become meaningful to you."

And this is what's happening as we do this work, as we practice.

By way of inspiration, I'd like to close with a poem from a Chinese Buddhist nun who lived in the thirteenth century. Her name was Miaozong:

In the shade of two trees and the hanging green of the cliffs,
one lamp for a thousand years broke open upon the dark barriers.
I too now realize that phenomena are nothing but a magic show
and happily grow old among the mist, the rivers, and the stones.

May the wholesome energy that arises from our practice be dedicated to the welfare and liberation of all beings everywhere.

CHAPTER 9

Morning Instructions

Myoshin Kelley · 58 min

> *In this morning instruction session from the IMS Three-Month Retreat, Myoshin Kelley provides practical guidance for establishing and maintaining mindful awareness. She begins by inviting practitioners to check their attitude upon entering practice—noticing whether there is an agenda of wanting or a quality of receptivity and openness. The instructions emphasize recognizing experience as it arises through all sense doors: sounds, bodily sensations, mind states, and the feeling tones of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral (vedanā).*
>
> *A central theme is the importance of noticing how we relate to our experience. Kelley encourages practitioners to recognize subtle aversion—the wish to push away what is unpleasant—and craving, including the three types: craving for sensual pleasure (kāma-taṇhā), craving to become (bhava-taṇhā), and craving for non-existence or to get rid of experience (vibhava-taṇhā). When greed, hatred, and delusion (lobha, dosa, moha) arise strongly, these become the very experiences to understand and learn from.*
>
> *The talk addresses continuity of practice extending from morning to night, suggesting practitioners investigate where they habitually "check out" during the day. Kelley offers guidance on balancing tranquility (samatha) with alertness and investigation, noting how excessive tranquility leads to spaciousness becoming "spaced-outness," while overactive investigation creates agitation. Throughout, she emphasizes relaxation rather than straining, and the transformative power of simply knowing our reactive patterns with mindfulness.*

Establishing the sitting posture, checking that there is a sense of relaxation. Checking the attitude in the mind as we enter into this period of practice. Is there an agenda, a wanting, or a sense of receptivity, openness? In any moment, recognizing what is being known.

There will be experiences through all of the sense doors—hearing being known, sensations in the body arising, being known, and disappearing again. States of mind. The atmosphere in the mind.

Sometimes the terrain will be quiet, calm, still. At other times it will be volatile, changing rapidly. There may be many mind states coming in quick succession—anger, sadness, disappointment—all to be known as they are.

Noticing how thoughts can affect mind states. How mind states can affect thoughts. Types of thoughts. Awareness of thinking itself. Recognizing when thinking is occurring.

With all of these experiences, some of them will be pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. At times this feeling tone will be what's predominant. It too can be known.

With all these experiences, check: How are we relating? What's the attitude? Is there a subtle sense of trying to get rid of this? Not wanting? Or is there a wanting for some experience to continue, or trying to create something? When reactions are present, this becomes the experience to be recognized. Aversion or wanting.

At times greed, hatred, and delusion will be very strong in our experience. We look to understanding, knowing, being with these experiences, to learn from them. Understanding what it is that fuels or feeds these states. Understanding the suffering that comes when we identify with them. All of these experiences to be known in their nature.

Working with continuity—not a continuity that is trying to bear down, that is straining, tightening, but a continuity that comes from perseverance, a willingness of heart to remember, to recognize what is being known.

When experiences become overwhelming, consuming, and mindfulness is lost, one can let the attention steady with one aspect of experience: hearing, breathing, sitting. Before using skillful means, or before shifting a body posture, it can be helpful to just notice what's happening for a moment. And then, if wisdom says change is needed, to follow through, but to recognize what is occurring, to bring it into consciousness.

Letting there be a balance between tranquility and alertness. Tranquility is strengthened through this sense of receptivity, receiving experience, and alertness through interest or investigation. If the tranquility becomes too strong, spaciousness turns to spaced-outness, and we need this quality of interest. If investigation becomes overactive, the mind becomes agitated, needing to invite this quality of receptivity.

Relaxing into the awareness of present moment experience with interest.

Many times throughout the day, check the attitude. How's the mind relating? This often goes unnoticed. Sometimes checking to see if there's anything in your experience in this moment that you're subtly trying to push away or ignore. And just noticing the reactivity in the mind, and seeing what happens.

I wanted to continue on a little bit more on the theme of continuity because it is so important. And the continuity not just being during a period of sitting meditation, but that we really are working with continuity of practice from the time we wake up in the morning until we go to bed at night. I offer a small suggestion of something that I found very helpful.

And that was to notice where in the day I was having the most trouble. Where in the day the mind was habitually checking out. And then just to take an interest in what was happening there. Many times I'd notice that there was just some thought that got identified with: "I'm too tired." And then we listen to the thought—end of practice. "It's too hard. I can't do this." So just seeing what's happening in these moments in a totally non-judgmental way, but from the place of interest, noticing the scenes where we keep checking out.

In exploring this, we find there are different intensities, different flavors to these moments of checking out. The invitation is to become familiar with all of it, to come to really know it in your own experience.

In one sense, how you work with this is really up to you. What we need to do is become familiar with our own tendencies of mind. It might be that one's tendency is to sit down, and if one doesn't do something like the body scan, to just sit and get lost for fifteen minutes, and then go, "Oh, yeah—meditation." In that case, it's going to be helpful to have a way to really establish some continuity of recognition of what's happening in our experience. But if one is doing the body scan because one doesn't like what one's feeling and just wants to get away from something, then it might not be so skillful.

I like to take practice out of habit. So when you sit down, listen and have a sense: does this feel like it could be something really useful to do? And then open up. There's nothing wrong with doing body scans—it can be very helpful at times. It's just our learning to listen to when those times might be, and what the underlying motivation is.

There's a question around craving, and the observation that it seems to have a strong relationship with aversion. Last night when I was speaking very briefly about craving, I mentioned that there are three types. There's the craving for sensual pleasure—anything through our sense doors, pleasant experience, just craving that. There is the craving to become—the sense of "I am," the sense of identifying with experience. And then there is this other one, which is to get rid of, to not want, to not want to be.

By investigating pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, you're beginning to see that there is a lot of this craving not to be. And that's just to be recognized. That doesn't need to be judged. This, again, is our teacher. It's here. We can learn from it. Can you really just know that aversion? Know the nature of aversion. And just see what happens in the knowing of it when there is mindfulness with the experience.

It really can be life-changing, because so often we are directing the whole course of our life from that place of aversion without recognizing it. It's conditioning what we will do, how we will act, how we will respond. Any time that we see these things, we can really rejoice in the seeing, the recognition.

It's important to recognize how things are being known. If things are moving really quickly, this is just one way that, at times, experience is known. Things can be rapidly changing, and there's no need to try and focus in on one aspect of that. Sometimes, even within that, one aspect may become more predominant. That's okay. You don't have to try to make it be one way. Relax with how it's being known.

Even though the experience may be changing quickly, there can be a real steadiness when there's continuity of mindfulness. It's really just that steadiness that we're working with, and then experience will arise in many different ways.

There are times where focusing on one aspect of experience will bring the seeing of many different nuances to it. The wanting that you spoke of coming in—that needs to be recognized.

You might experiment with this. Just sitting here, having a sense of settling back with the eyes open, you don't need to focus on anything. Just relax with that knowing. As we do so, many aspects of experience can be flickering through.

For many years I focused a lot, believing that was how I would see more. But what I've really been discovering is that whether there is just seeing one object or many, it's the relaxation in the mind that allows things to be known. When we tighten—and one of the things about working with one object is that often we do just what you described—we try hard, we try to focus more, we want to see more. All of that has an effect in the mind of tightening. It's like when the fist is tight, it can't hold much. When it's open, it can hold a lot. Whether you're working with one object or a very open awareness, the quality of relaxation allows so much to be known.

You are describing a very common experience—an aspect that leads to craving for intensity in our lives. It's difficult to be with neutral experience. In our lives, neutral experience tends to be what we don't pay attention to. I would just encourage investiga-

tion around that. You don't need a theory about why it is this way or what it is, but really just investigate. Anything it reveals to you will be interesting. Just the encouragement to be interested.

I love that this is a come-and-see practice. I've had my own experience of hearing things from teachers and thinking, "Hmm, I'm not so sure about that." But then looking into my own experience—we can get caught in evaluating and judging, but if we use that as inspiration to look more closely, the truth reveals itself. We see for ourselves.

Okay, so... Onward.

CHAPTER 10

Mindful Awareness of the Five Hindrances

Rebecca Bradshaw · 1h02

> *In this dharma talk, Rebecca Bradshaw offers a comprehensive exploration of the five hindrances (nīvaraṇa) that arise in meditation practice: sense desire (kāmacchanda), aversion (byāpāda), sloth and torpor (thīna-middha), restlessness and worry (uddhacca-kukkucca), and doubt (vicikicchā). Drawing from her 24 years of practice, she reframes these challenging mind states not as obstacles to eliminate but as "appropriate difficulties" that serve as the raw material for awakening.*
>
> *Bradshaw presents the Buddha's vivid similes for each hindrance—desire as a pond filled with colored dyes, aversion as boiling water, doubt as muddy water, sleepiness as algae-covered water, and restlessness as wind-whipped ripples—all obscuring our capacity for clear seeing (vipassanā). She offers practical antidotes for each: raising energy for sloth, expanding awareness for restlessness, making time-limited commitments for doubt, investigating the wanting itself for desire, and grounding in bodily sensations for aversion.*
>
> *The talk emphasizes that mindfulness (sati) is our primary protection, with each moment of awareness creating "pinpricks in the fabric" of the hindrances' power over us. Bradshaw shares personal stories with characteristic humor, including her struggles with sleepiness and a Dalai Lama anecdote about fruitcake, illustrating how we can hold these universal challenges with both wisdom and compassion. She concludes by highlighting the importance of noble friendship (kalyāṇa-mittatā) and encourages practitioners to take a patient, spacious view of working with these deeply conditioned patterns.*

My talk this evening is on mindful awareness of the five hindrances.

There are five states of mind that can sometimes visit our meditation. They're known as the hindrances, and they include a lot of what we don't like to face in practice. The five hindrances are sense desire, aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness, and doubt. I would guess that all of you have been visited by all five of these hindrances. No one avoids them in practice, though sometimes we are a little surprised at the extent to which they show up.

Yesterday, my partner asked me what I was going to be talking about tonight. I told him I was going to be talking about the hindrances, and he said, "Oh, good." I was a little surprised because people don't usually say "Oh, good" when you say you're going to talk about the hindrances. He doesn't practice quite as much as I do, but he's done a

few retreats, so he knows more or less what we're doing here. He's kind of like my informant to what people are thinking who have practiced some but maybe not a lot, because after twenty-four years, I can perhaps forget what it's like to be in that position.

So I said, "Why 'oh good'?" And he said, "Because I remember that it was really a relief for me to hear that these states of mind are acceptable, predictable, and unremarkable states." I told him I was going to use his quote because that's a really nice way of putting it. He got it. That's what we want to understand about the hindrances: that they're acceptable, predictable, and unremarkable.

Acceptable in that we want to learn to hold them with compassionate awareness. Predictable in that you can count on them showing up—it's not some failing on your part. We often think we're bad meditators when one of the hindrances shows up, but they're predictable; they will show up. And unremarkable, meaning that they're not personal. They arise because of conditions and they pass away when those conditions end. These three traits will be woven into my talk tonight.

These five states of mind are called hindrances because they cloud our ability to see clearly. Actually, they are strategies to avoid seeing life clearly. The Buddha said, "These are the hindrances and obstacles that overcome awareness and weaken clear seeing." It can feel that way when these hindrances show up—it can feel like we're being overcome. These hindrances may be the reason why Frank Herbert said, "To endure oneself may be the hardest task in the universe."

Since we're trying to cultivate clear seeing, which is the meaning of vipassana, obviously we need to learn how to work with these energies. Now, I'm not particularly sure I like the term "hindrance" because it makes it seem like these states of mind are something other than our practice, when they actually are our practice. I prefer the word "challenges," perhaps. Through working with these five challenges, we discover what peace of mind is. They're like the raw material of our freedom.

Our usual stance toward difficulties is to go the other way, to get as far as we can from them. In this way, difficulties control our life; we don't have peace. So what is it like to turn towards these five hindrances or challenges and meet them directly? Could this be part of our path towards a peaceful heart?

In the Tibetan tradition, there's a saying that aspiring yogis repeat when they begin to meditate: "Grant that I may be given appropriate difficulties and suffering on this journey so that my heart may be truly awakened and my practice of liberation and uni-

versal compassion may be truly fulfilled." We can consider these challenges of these five mind states as appropriate difficulties on this journey to help us develop wisdom and compassion.

As I said, these challenges are deeply conditioned strategies that we have to avoid life as it is. Opening to them is like opening doors to life as it is, to wisdom—an inherent part of the practice. Joseph said the other night in his talk that meditation is not just bliss. I have a quote from Brad Warner in a book called *Hardcore Zen*. He says, "Zazen isn't about blissing out or going into alpha brainwave trances. It's about facing who and what you really are in every single damn moment. And you aren't just bliss, I'll tell you that right now. You're a mess."

We all are. But here's the thing—that mess is itself enlightenment.

Most of us have our favorite hindrance or two, the one that keeps showing up. Or maybe we'll experience what I call a "multiple hindrance attack," where you'll start with one hindrance. Perhaps you're a little tired. So then you'll start thinking, "Oh, I can't do this. It doesn't work. What am I doing here anyway? I could be spending my time in a much better way. Actually, what I'd really like to be doing right now is eating some pizza. That would be great. I mean, tofu—how much tofu can a person eat? I'm pretty tired of the food around here." And there you go, you have a multiple hindrance attack. Sometimes you can start with one and cover all five in a short period of time.

I think a sense of humor is a very appropriate response when talking about the hindrances, because if you don't have a sense of humor about these, you are going to get in trouble. Striking some chord here, huh?

With these challenges, we can't control their arising—they're impersonal energies that arise because of conditions. But we can apply some skillful antidotes to deal with them. We also have to learn how to live with them skillfully and peacefully. So our relationship to these challenges when they arise is very important. We need to check whether our relationship is one of aversion, or whether we're able to accept what's going on at the same time as we take appropriate steps to work with them.

Keep checking your attitude when the hindrances arise. If we feel aversion and want them to go away, we just increase our suffering and increase our entanglement in the hindrances. Of course, we'll all try this—we all have to try it and see if it works first. Perhaps you're sleepy and you don't want to be sleepy and you want sleepiness to go away and you fight with sleepiness. Before you know it, you've worn yourself out and you've added aversion to your list of hindrances that you're experiencing in the moment.

If we fight with these hindrances, we see that we just increase their strength. But if we're aware of them and accepting of them while not neglecting to work with them appropriately, we can find freedom even within their occurrence.

So how do we work with these five challenges when they come up? Our first and best tool is mindfulness. We want to cultivate a relationship of not getting lost in these states of mind, of being aware when they arise. Recognizing these hindrances when they arise and observing them and getting to know and understand their nature can help them lose their power over us. We can actually be happy each time we become aware of one of these challenges, because it is the awareness that transforms them.

A steady accumulation of moments of mindfulness pokes holes in their power to seduce us and overwhelm us. One friend of mine describes it like a piece of cloth, a fabric, and each moment of mindfulness is like a pinprick in the fabric. Enough pinpricks and you start to be able to see through the fabric. This is how we can cultivate an understanding of the hindrances so that they don't overwhelm us.

The Buddha said that careless attention is what causes these mind states to grab hold of us and to strengthen. We aren't mindful, so they run us over. The antidote then is careful or mindful attention. Mindfulness is our protection. We see each hindrance clearly for what it is. We learn to meet these energies with kindness and compassion. We see that mindfulness, curiosity, compassion, and kindness are appropriate ways to hold these challenges.

During the metta sitting the other day, I offered the quote: "Wisdom tells me I am nothing, love tells me I am everything." Wisdom tells us that these hindrances aren't me or mine. Love tells us that we practice inclusivity, no part left out. Both are true. The hindrances aren't personal, they're not me and mine, and yet we hold them with love and acceptance.

I'd like to start with what are to me the two simplest hindrances: sleepiness and restlessness—or more formally, sloth and torpor, and restlessness and anxiety. They're a related pair. Sloth and torpor is low energy. I've read that sloth is the physical low energy and torpor is the mental low energy. The Buddha said that when sloth and torpor have overtaken us, it's like being imprisoned—you can't get out and enjoy the festival. A simile of a pond is often used when describing the hindrances, and for sleepiness, it's like a pond covered with algae or slime.

It's dense and you can't see through it.

Restlessness, on the other hand, is an excess of energy. Physically, the body can feel jumpy—that kind of "I have to keep moving" feeling. And mentally, the mind is jumpy, full of anxiety, churning with restless thoughts, perhaps a feeling like "I've got to get out of this hall or I'm going to die." The Buddha said that when restlessness overwhelms us, it's like being a slave, ordered about with no rest. Or that restlessness is like a pond whipped by the wind—the surface so rippled and agitated that you can't see through, you can't see deeply.

One interesting thing about restlessness is that in this tradition there are different stages of enlightenment, and it's said that at each stage certain fetters or difficulties of mind fall away. Restlessness is said not to go until full enlightenment—it's in the last batch. So if you suffer from a little restlessness in the hall, you don't have to feel bad about it. It sticks around a while, very deeply conditioned in us.

The remedies for sleepiness and restlessness are to balance out the energy as best we can. For sleepiness or sloth and torpor, I'll offer some traditional antidotes. It's rather a long list, so don't try to remember all of them, but see if there's one or two you might want to try.

With sleepiness, we want to raise the energy level. One simple way is to open the eyes—it brings in light, it can bring in more energy. We can also become interested in sleepiness itself. The very interest sometimes will dispel it. What does it feel like in the body? What does it feel like in the mind? We can learn the earliest signs of sleepiness and take action at that point, before it gets too overwhelming. I started to notice that for me, the first sign is these strange hypnagogic visions—weird images that make no sense and you can't remember at all. That's my signal that sleepiness is just starting to come, so opening my eyes at that point can be helpful.

We can reflect on why we're practicing, to see if that raises our interest in what we're doing. We can reflect on our death to create urgency. We can stand. It can often be useful to do brisk walking outside and get some fresh air. Pulling on the earlobes—I've tried it, and it actually does help some.

Jack Kornfield tells a wonderful story about raising energy. When he was practicing in Thailand with Ajahn Chah, if some yogi was suffering greatly from sleepiness, Ajahn Chah would have them do their sitting practice on the edge of a deep well. It supposedly worked quite well. We don't have one here, but...

And then we often recommend graceful surrender. Sometimes we are simply tired. Our human bodies aren't made to be on high energy all the time—it would be like having a little motor running constantly at full speed. You would burn it out. We can start

to know our own energy patterns. I know for me, I'm a person who has a lot of energy in the morning, and then it just goes downhill the rest of the day. So I plan accordingly in how I use my time.

Be kind with yourself in understanding this—that energy levels will change, and at times when energy is low, we can keep going as best we can with a light touch. Even if you have a lot of sleepiness during sittings, reflect on the fact that you're still awake for a pretty high percentage of the time—during walking meditation and all the times in between. So don't get too upset about it.

Early in my practice, this was my absolute favorite hindrance. I spent many sleepy sittings, especially after six in the evening. Sometimes I would almost fall asleep during walking meditation. And I didn't need more sleep—that wasn't the problem. It was simply that my energy was low at that time of night. I remember once when I was sitting with Sayadaw U Pandita, who you may have heard about—a fairly strict meditation master. I would fall asleep during his talks. Half of it was in Burmese, which didn't help much.

So one night he gave a talk on yogis who fall asleep during talks, how they didn't have any dharma energy. And I fell asleep during that talk. But my practice kept working, so don't worry too much.

I think the biggest problem for many of us with sleepiness is the not wanting it to be there. So checking the attitude—is there aversion? Are we having thoughts that we're a bad meditator, or that we should somehow be able to control whether sleepiness happens? No, it's just conditions. It's impersonal. It's not your fault if you're sleepy.

Then there's restlessness, which is an excess of energy. A few ideas on working with restlessness: First of all, we always have mindfulness. What does it feel like in the body and the mind? Can we recognize, be aware of, and be interested in restlessness?

Sometimes when restlessness is present, it can be helpful to make our awareness larger than the restlessness. Instead of trying to follow what's happening—because when it's restless, sometimes there's this feeling like you're chasing your experience around trying to catch up to it—if the awareness can be large and hold the restlessness within it, then it can be okay. Just: there's restlessness.

Sometimes if there's a lot of restlessness, it can be helpful to anchor the attention with one experience for a period of time to see if that helps calm the mind a little bit. Perhaps resting the attention with your breath, or resting the attention with hearing. Sometimes restlessness likes a large pasture, so hearing can be a good anchor if there's a lot of restlessness, or the feeling of the whole body sitting. Restlessness doesn't like to

be contained too much. We have to give it a little bit of space. And Joseph is famous for saying that you can't be the first meditator to die of restlessness. It feels that way sometimes—restlessness is like, ah!

Sometimes we experience sleepiness and restlessness as a protection from deeper pain, as a kind of resistance. And while we can work skillfully with them, I also feel like it's important to have proper respect for our protections. Sometimes we come in here with the idea that we're going to blast through our protections and pull open our hearts. But sometimes it's a bit slower than that. I think if we didn't need our protections, we'd all be fully enlightened. Our protections can help us accept life at a pace that works for us. So when these protections are present—sometimes it's just an energy imbalance, but when they are present—we can focus on the acceptance part of mindfulness, the metta part. Can we hold these energies with care?

The next hindrance I'd like to talk about is doubt. Now this one's a bit more insidious. It can be really sneaky. It's also a very difficult hindrance because it can be paralyzing. The Buddha compared it to muddy water that obscures wisdom. He also compared doubt to traveling in the desert without a map or provisions—not sure of the way, you go in circles, always jumpy, afraid of bandits, no reference points, lost. He also compared doubt to a traveler with valuables coming to a fork in the road and tarrying too long deciding which fork to take, only to be overcome by bandits.

We may doubt this practice, we may doubt the teachers, we may doubt our ability, we may doubt that it's the right time to do this. The thing with doubt is it can make up the most believable stories once it gets going. And if we're not aware of it, it can tell us stories that we start to believe. These can paralyze us from investigating further and cause us to pull back in our practice. So doubt can be a problem if we're not aware of it and we believe it.

But doubt isn't always negative. It can inspire us to look deeper in our practice. Bernie Glassman says in *Instructions to the Cook*, "Doubt is a state of openness and unknowing. It's a willingness to not be in charge, to not know what is going to happen next. The state of doubt allows us to explore things in an open and fresh way. Our problem with doubt is that we take it to be a negative thing. We think that because we don't understand, or because we're not sure, there is something wrong. But this doubt can be positive. Positive doubt can allow us to see what life is about. It can help us get rid of our complacency."

So doubt can inspire us to search more deeply, and we can use it in that way to fuel our practice, to see for ourselves. It can keep us from getting too sure, from knowing too much.

After several years of practice, a student came to Katagiri Roshi saying, "I used to think I knew what you were saying in your lectures, but lately I just don't get it at all." A grin spread over his teacher's features. "Finally," Katagiri Roshi said, "you're getting somewhere."

He's pointing to that positive aspect of doubt—if it lets us be open to seeing freshly, seeing anew.

But if doubt is causing our practice to be stalled or paralyzed, here are some possible antidotes. Again, be mindful of doubt. Notice when it arises. What is it? What is doubt? It seems like it's a string of thoughts, and some fear perhaps, and some resistance. How do you experience it in the body? How do you experience it in the mind? Just being aware of it can be a very powerful antidote to its power over you.

Perhaps notice the relationship of doubt to emotion. Do certain emotions bring on doubt for you? Perhaps boredom, or aversion, or failed expectation? These can often bring on doubt. Notice the relationship of energy to doubt. Do you find that doubt arises when your energy is low? If you know that, then when your energy is low, you can be on the lookout for doubt so that it doesn't sabotage you.

The Buddha said another antidote to doubt is to get conceptual knowledge—to hear the Dharma, to ask questions, to get clarifications. But only to a certain extent. That conceptual knowledge can only take us so far. An even better antidote is developing faith through verification, through one's own experience. So as we practice more and develop faith through our own experience, we will often find that doubt lessens.

One last antidote for doubt can be to make a time-limited commitment and judge afterwards. You may find that questions arise: Is this practice any good? Is it the right thing for me? Do I know how to do it? Do these teachers know what they're doing? All the questions that can come up. You can make as long a commitment as possible. If you can make it three months, great. You can make a date with doubt and say, "Okay, on December 14th, I'll sit down and we'll have a long chat. You can tell me all your concerns and I'll think about them." But if you do that during the retreat, you find that it just dissipates your energy. So if you can't make it to December 14th, well, maybe a week. All right, next Friday night after the talk, we can have a little doubt fest for half an hour. We can think about it then. Because they're important questions, right? These are important questions. But they will sabotage you if you spend a lot of time getting lost in them.

One last quote about doubt, again from Brad Warner in *Hardcore Zen*: "Doubt in everything is absolutely essential. Everything, no matter how great, how fundamental, how beautiful or important it is, must be questioned." So meditation is doubting all that we carelessly assume about life and investigating for ourselves.

All right, now we get to the last two juicy hindrances: sense desire and aversion.

Sense desire. The Buddha said that all of our suffering comes out of desire, the mind that wants. Of course, we're all familiar with this mind. It has many variations: wanting, greed, envy, covetousness, fantasy, obsessions, addictions, attachment, expectations. They all boil down to wanting.

Sense desire arises when we give unwise attention to beautiful objects. What does that mean? Sense desire is a kind of energetic leaning towards pleasant things or experiences, a tendency to grasp at pleasantness. It's a part of all of our conditioning. Something pleasant comes along and we want to hold on to it, keep it.

Yes, I want that. It's our tendency, if we're not aware or give unwise attention, to think that this thing will satisfy us. That's where the lack of wisdom enters.

When sense desire operates, Patrick O'Fools, in the book I mentioned the other night, *Buddha Takes No Prisoners*, says it's like we frenetically rearrange the deck chairs on the SS Samsara, trying to make ourselves happy by acquisition.

Here's a quote: "We live in a society whose whole policy is to excite every nerve in the human body and keep it at the highest pitch of artificial tension, to strain every human desire to the limit and to create as many new desires and synthetic passions as possible in order to cater to them with the products of our factories and our printing presses and movie studios and all the rest."

When do you think that was written? Thomas Merton, 1920s. We can relate to it now, can't we?

We're told every day to believe that if we satisfy our desires, we'll be happy. There was a Newsweek cover that I liked. It said, "What You'll Want Next." We're a little bit radical here. We're taking the revolutionary stance that we want to learn to work with desire in a balanced way rather than to be enslaved by it.

The Buddha said that desire is like a pond filled with lovely colored dyes. We become distracted and enchanted by the dyes and don't look more deeply. Because sense desire has something pleasant as its object, we don't always recognize the suffering in it. It can seem quite nice. It gets confused with the pleasantness of the object.

So what is the problem with sense desire? Sense desire is a state of tension, a state of separation. It obscures the truth that nothing can permanently bring us happiness—no sense pleasure can permanently bring us happiness. If we look closely at the state of desire, we see that it is actually a state of tension, of stress, of dukkha, suffering. There isn't any peace in it. If we satisfy one desire, we may have a few moments of peace, but that peace is really just that desire isn't present in that moment, and then another desire will come up.

The Buddha compared this wanting energy with being in debt. It arises again and again and it's never paid off. Or he likened it to a traveler who leaves without provisions and thinks the next town will have food and drink, arrives there and finds it empty, and goes on to the next village thinking it will have food and drink and finds it empty too. The truth of this world is that everything changes, and if we look for our happiness in sense desire, we're always going to be restless because of the continual searching that will be necessary.

So what should we do when desire arises in our practice? First, we can remember that it's not desire that is the problem—it's being lost in desire that is the problem, the difficulty. So we want to be mindful of it. We don't need to repress it or condemn it or make it go away. But we also don't want to encourage it or feed it.

The way we do this is by turning our attention toward the desire itself and investigating it. Usually when sense desire arises, we're very focused on the object of our desire. In our investigation, we turn from the object to the wanting itself. We apply this tool of mindfulness. We recognize, first of all, that sense desire is present.

If mindfulness is strong or the desire isn't particularly strong, that may be sufficient to return the mind to spaciousness. Sometimes we'll turn our attention to desire and it will evaporate. If not, we may need to explore it in a little more detail. What does it feel like in the body? What kind of sensations may be associated with it? What is the flavor in the mind? We become very intimate with wanting—its back and its front, its subtleties, its nuances.

This clear seeing is very freeing. It means that we don't have to be run by desire. We can let it arise and let it pass away. It doesn't have to fool us and rule us. We can become interested in the difference between being mindful of desire and not being mindful of desire. What happens when we're not mindful? What happens with desire? We believe whole stories about what will satisfy us.

What happens when we're aware of desire? Is there a problem? This is something we can explore.

On retreat, we have our own particular forms of desire that arise. We've mentioned Vipassana romances—finding somebody we find particularly attractive and getting a whole story going about our relationship to them. There are many things we can crave in our little world here on retreat. How much time do you spend thinking about lunch? Or the other comforts we may crave?

Our practice is not to consider desire something that must be gotten rid of, but something to be understood, investigated, and understood. When we can do this, we can learn to hold our desires with a lot more lightness, perhaps even playfulness.

One of my favorite stories about relating to desire comes from one of Sharon Salzberg's books about the Dalai Lama. She writes:

"At a Buddhist-Christian conference I attended at Gethsemane Monastery in Kentucky, His Holiness the Dalai Lama was speaking about the tour of the monastery he'd been given earlier that day. He began by saying that he was quite impressed that the monastery was able to support itself through the manufacture of cheeses and fruitcakes. Then in the midst of this formal presentation, with television cameras rolling, the Dalai Lama said, 'I was presented with a piece of homemade cheese, which was very good, but I really wanted some cake.' He laughed uproariously and repeated, 'It was so unfortunate. Really, I was hoping someone would offer me some cake, and no one did.' His childlike candor was wonderful, with nothing manipulative about it. Clearly, he could be quite happy without a piece of fruitcake, and some of this state of happiness was the very ability to laugh at his desire for the cake—as well as being able to speak about it unabashedly before dignitaries of two religions and a television audience."

It's great, isn't it? Maybe we can learn to hold our wanting mind like this.

Not long after I had read that passage, I took my two goddaughters out for ice cream for one of their birthdays. We got a free hot fudge sundae at the end, and I like hot fudge sundaes. So we were sharing it, all of us with our spoons. And in a moment of careless attention, I got overcome with desire, and I pushed Davi's spoon out of the way so I could take a big chunk of hot fudge. We just started to laugh. They said, "Rebecca, did you see what you did?" And we just laughed. We thought it was so funny. They reminded me of it for months afterwards. But we were able to hold it a little like the Dalai Lama—"Oh, look at that. It's the wanting mind."

So last but not least is aversion, which is another one of my particular favorites.

Aversion manifests in many different forms: fear, anger, ill will, hatred, annoyance, irritation, anxiety, panic, terror, resentment, judgment, boredom. It's a moving away from experience, a rejection of experience—giving unwise attention to repulsive objects, as the Buddha said.

The Buddha's simile for being lost in aversion is that it's like being ill. Nothing tastes good. You can't enjoy anything. And it's like boiling water—when water boils, it's turbulent and you can't see through it. Aversion contracts the heart and narrows our vision.

Remember the last time you were angry with somebody. What a narrow picture you had of that person at that point. Or the last time you were afraid—how fixated you were on the object of fear, cutting out the larger view. Aversion blocks our connection and causes us to feel separate and alienated. It contracts the heart.

Aversion is deeply conditioned, as is sense desire. With sense desire, we have sense contact.

We experience it as pleasant. And if we're not mindful, desire arises and we get lost in it. With aversion, we have sense contact, we experience it as unpleasant, and if we're not mindful, aversion arises and we can get lost in it. So desire wants to hold on and aversion wants to push away.

Whereas the painfulness of desire can be masked by the pleasantness of the craved object, aversion is clearly painful to most people, and we don't tend to like it. We tend to want to get rid of it. It can cause us to lash out in ways that are quite unskillful. Or we may suppress it, which doesn't give us a chance to learn how to work with it skillfully—and there's the likelihood that it will come leaking out in some unskillful way.

And so mindfulness, again, is our antidote of choice: becoming aware of aversion, letting it be there, but not acting it out unskillfully. We bring wise attention to aversion. Anger feels like this. Fear feels like this. How do we experience anger or fear? How do we experience it in the body? How do we experience it in the mind?

Sometimes when we're experiencing aversion, it can be useful to ground in the body, to experience it there, because the mind stories, as we all know, can be so seductive. We can get swept up and lost in them so easily. And again, the power of aversion is that we believe it. We believe all these stories that come up. We get lost in the stories. We identify with them. So even if we can just remember that it's a mind state, notice that it's present—that's a great advance. It's one of those little holes in the fabric. We're on our way to freedom.

The antidote to aversion is interest. How about judgment? Can you count how many times judgment comes up in a sitting? Can we become interested in it? I've particularly in the last few years become interested in noticing how long it takes me from when I first have to deal with unpleasantness or some kind of sudden change till I accept it, till acceptance comes. Just watching the whole process of how my mind will deal with some inconvenience or some unpleasantness.

For example, I fly sometimes to teach, and it's not such a picnic flying these days. There will often be schedule changes and cancellations and this and that. And so I'll be very interested. I just watch my mind. Okay, what does it do when I get to the monitor and look at it and my flight's been canceled or changed? How long does it take? How long do I fight it until I can accept it?

Recently, I was traveling for about sixteen days. Some of it was a vacation, but I was in Portland, Oregon and quite ready to fly back to my own home and bed after a number of days on the road. I got to the airport and by some new rule they had made, they wouldn't let me get on my flight. This meant I was going to have to stay overnight another night because it was the last flight out that day. I was going to have to find a place to stay in Portland. Not pleasant.

So I watched how I dealt with this. And I was really tired, so I started to cry. And then this voice in my mind said, "Rebecca, you've been practicing for twenty-four years and you're a Dharma teacher. Shouldn't you be doing better than this?" And then I said, "Well, I'm not. I'm tired. I want to go home." And so I said, "Okay, well, I'm going to be all right with that then." And I let myself have a little—I mean, I didn't sob out loud, but there were tears going down my cheek. I said, "Okay, I'm just going to be with this until it passes." So I just sat there. And then it passed, and then I said, "Okay, now what do I need to do about finding a place to stay tonight?" You just start where you're at.

There was something powerful about simply being able to say, okay, this is what's happening right now. And it will change. I knew it would change, and it did.

On retreat, we have a special kind of aversion called yogi mind, which I mentioned the first night and which tends to pick up steam around this point. Once you're starting to cook, yogi mind picks up steam. Yogi mind is when something little—because there's not a lot happening, or rather, there is a lot happening around here, but there's not a lot coming in from the outside—little things become really important.

You may even have a VV. We mentioned VRs, Vipassana romances. Well, there's also an aversive form of this known as a VV, which is a Vipassana vendetta. That's when there's somebody on retreat who you have just decided you don't like. It's just some

little thing you've picked up and then projected, the same as a Vipassana romance. But they can get pretty intense. We can have whole Vipassana vendettas. So we should watch out for this. Watch out for the aversion that can take over when something in this environment doesn't go exactly as you wished, or when you see your Vipassana vendetta walk by. See if you can make that part of your practice and not separate.

I still remember a number of years ago sitting a retreat here with an ex-boyfriend. It had been a few months, but it was still sore for me. I saw a note he had put up on the bulletin board addressed to a woman. I worked with that for a week—all the emotions it brought up. But the great thing was, it was actually really interesting. It was painful at first, but then it got really interesting to understand and see how the emotions would roll through, and what would happen when I was able to bring more and more mindfulness to them. That was yogi mind.

The interesting part of the story is that after retreat, I said something to him about this note he had written to this woman. He said, "I didn't write any notes on that retreat." I had made the whole thing up. This is yogi mind, so watch out for it.

A universal antidote for all of the hindrances is noble friendship. Sangha. I like to think of us all here together supporting and strengthening this noble friendship—the fact that we're all here with this commitment to work with these five challenges. That helps. Sometimes we support each other by persevering together. You come into the hall and see it full of other people, and you feel inspired to keep going even if you're in the middle of a multiple hindrance attack. Sometimes we support each other through challenging each other, through our Vipassana vendettas and our Vipassana romances. Noble friendship is supporting each other as we work together to meet these mind states with compassion and with mindfulness.

Sometimes it feels a bit slow, doesn't it? The hindrances keep coming back. They may find new ways to trick us, seduce us that we weren't aware of. I think we have to be willing to be very, very patient in our working with them.

In that line, I'm going to end with a story from a book called *In Praise of Slow* by Carl Honoré, to give us some long-term perspective.

Another marathonic musical event is underway in Halberstadt, a small German town famous for its ancient organs. The local St. Burchardi Church, a twelfth-century pile that was sacked by Napoleon, is the venue for a concert that will end in the year 2640, sponsors permitting. The featured work was written in 1992 by John Cage, the avant-garde American composer. Its title, appropriately enough, is ASLSP, or "As Slow As Possible."

How long the piece should last has long been a bone of contention among cognoscenti. Some thought twenty minutes enough; hardliners insisted on nothing short of eternity. After consulting a panel of musicologists, composers, organists, theologians, and philosophers, Halberstadt settled on 639 years—the exact time that had passed since the creation of the town's renowned blockwork organ. To do justice to Cage's piece, the organizers built an organ that will last for centuries. Weights attached to the keyboard hold down notes long after the organist has left.

The ASLSP recital began in September 2001 with a pause that lasted seventeen months. During that time, the only sound was that of the organ's bellows inflating. In February of 2003, an organist played the first three notes, which will reverberate through the church until the summer of 2004, when the next two notes will be played.

The notion of a concert so slow that no one who attends opening night will live to hear the final note clearly strikes a chord with the public. Hundreds of spectators descend on Halberstadt each time an organist comes to play the next set of notes. During the long months in between, visitors flock to soak up the residual sounds echoing around the church.

It's a spacious view—profoundly spacious.

And so I want to encourage us all to take a spacious view of the hindrances, to hold them with mindfulness, but also to hold them with abundant compassion and generous patience. These visitors that arise in our practice—desire, aversion, sloth, restlessness, doubt—they are not problems to be quickly solved and dismissed. They are teachers arriving on their own schedule, playing their notes, and then falling silent again.

Like those visitors to Halberstadt who come to soak up the residual sounds, we too can learn to be present with whatever echoes through the chambers of our own hearts and minds. We need not rush the piece to its conclusion. We need not demand that our practice conform to our preferred timeline.

Let us sit for a moment together.

May your work with the five challenges open the doors of wisdom.

CHAPTER 11

Morning Instructions #8: Intention, Feeling Tone, and the Flow of Experience

Patricia Genoud-Feldman · 1h01

> *In this intimate morning Q&A session from the three-month retreat, Patricia Genoud-Feldman guides practitioners through nuanced investigations of intention (cetanā) and feeling tone (vedanā). The discussion emerges from a practitioner's question about what initiates each movement or breath, leading to an exploration of how intention arises as a rapid, momentary impulse within the flow of experience. Patricia clarifies that intention itself does not create clinging—rather, it is our relationship to vedanā (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling tones) that can give rise to craving and aversion.*
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> *The teaching addresses a common misunderstanding that can arise in practice: when practitioners notice unpleasant feeling followed by aversion, they may incorrectly conclude that intention causes suffering. Patricia emphasizes staying simple with direct experience rather than allowing the mind to fabricate conceptual beliefs about causation. She explains how the aggregates (khandhas) arise as a heap of conditions manifesting moment to moment, pointing toward the Buddha's teaching on paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination).*
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> *Practical guidance is offered on working with neutral feeling tones, which become more apparent as practice deepens on long retreat. Patricia encourages practitioners to allow mindfulness to lead rather than the controlling 'small mind,' letting investigation arise naturally within open awareness. This marks a transition point in the retreat where formal instructions give way to silence and direct inquiry, as the sangha moves from 'doing the practice' to 'living the practice.'*

Over the last days since we've been here, all the instructions have been offered and given to you. So as from this morning, we'll be sitting in silence and at nine o'clock take questions.

Do you have any questions about your practice this morning?

A yogi asks: What is it that makes the intention to make the next step or maybe the next breath?

It's very interesting to have enough interest to explore what it is so that we really see for ourselves exactly what is happening in each moment. It's a momentary experience that is extremely rapid. You can notice how impermanence begins to really kick in in our understanding as we see the flow of experience changing—emotions, thoughts. Before an action, there is that intention, which really is a kind of impulse.

Often we can notice, when we're really present, there's this whole energetic field of experience. It's not only coming from the thinking mind, from the concept that we're going to decide the next thing that's going to happen. When we begin to drop into that momentary presence, that mindfulness of just living from that space, there's an emergence of different components. There's going to be a talk on the aggregates—the aggregates being a heap of conditions that come together and manifest.

Another yogi shares an experience of investigating intention, which brought about an understanding of seeing the manifestation of heightened unpleasant feeling. This heightened unpleasant feeling was seen, and rather than going for the action, there was more inquiry into the intention. It seems like aversion was coming up. The question arose: Was that intention the motive for the aversion to arise? If so, is intention the source of clinging? And wouldn't one want to avoid having intention?

What you saw is great because it really leads to emphasizing the heightened interest in seeing momentary cause and effect. And it's not at all the intention that creates clinging. But that's what the experience was in that moment.

To notice this is very interesting—how clinging comes about, or clinging in the sense of craving for not becoming or not having an experience, which was that particular momentary experience of aversion that came about. But it's not about not having intention. It could really manifest in a very different way.

What happened there was that there was a cause and effect, and you were really relating to the feeling tone, which was unpleasant. It had not to do with the intention to push it away. So it's not a cause and effect in that way.

Now, it's exactly where we want to stay simple, because otherwise the mind fabricates, creates this belief that you might have had—and it's good that you ask that question—of "Oh, intention is creating clinging," which is a totally wrong belief. So you want to be very careful to stay very simple and to see that in that momentary process you could have stayed with the unpleasant feeling. Just holding that intention to really remain with what was happening in that moment, and then see what was the next experience.

Often we skip. We're in the action, and even not in the action, but imagining the result of the action. And here it's really coming back and looking so much more closely at what is the emergence of making an action. So to really stay simple with the intention, and yet it's a wonderful area of investigation, bringing interest to the investigation.

I know for myself that exactly what brings that quality of interest is around the unpleasant feeling tone—that the feeling tone in a way really reveals an intention to move because it's an unpleasant sensation.

A yogi shares that in her experience there often is a feeling of unpleasant or pleasant, but because everything in this sitting seemed quite calm and tranquil, there was a sense of neutral. It seems like she's looking for the habitual feeling tone of pleasant or unpleasant.

It can be completely neutral, which means that it will be neither pleasant nor unpleasant—naturally neutral. You mean calmer than usual. And so, no, you're totally understanding.

I think at the level of the feeling tone, there's not much that the mind needs to understand conceptually. It's really a feeling. So you want to see exactly what is the construction in your mind, in the thinking process, around what is actually happening. You really want to see that—that you have a thought about maybe how it is and how it should be. If that is happening, you really want to bring that into the mindfulness.

We're not used to this in our daily lives—the deepening into or the subtleties of that neutral feeling. And in practice, especially on long retreat, there are moments where experience will be really quite neutral. There's nothing to worry about, quite the contrary. It's simply about appreciating what is present. And yet, does the mind tend to pull away because it's looking for something more heightened? Perfect then, just allow that to be as it is.

Question from participant about when to investigate a single object versus staying with the flow of changing experience.

I think it's important to hold the intention here as you're sitting to allow experience to reveal itself in the natural flow of things. This means you're allowing mindfulness to be the leader in a way. So that "me," who may have the tendency to want to control or be on top of experience—if that is happening, that needs to be seen.

Now, if mindfulness is present, there's going to be a clear seeing of different types of experiences. The momentary changing flow of experience already holds the investigation. Do you understand? So it's not about trying to keep an object or holding onto an object. There's going to be a very clear presence.

Like now, I can totally be aware of the sound that's happening outside, as well as the sound of my voice. And small mind, or "me," could say, "Okay, now which one do I choose to listen to?" But mindfulness, if it's just open awareness, notices both in the field of awareness. Very clearly, one might at one point come forth a little more. That investigation factor is already working.

This is what we're here for—to really live the practice rather than do the practice, you see? And we do move from that wonderful investigation of trying it out, and we'll be doing things that we think are helpful for a certain while. Then as mindfulness really comes forth with all the other factors—investigation, interest, calm, tranquility, equanimity—more and more the practice is lived from a place of experiential understanding. That understanding we talk about, which is intuitive understanding, reveals itself from that space of just allowing things to be. That's what we call insight.

May you enjoy this day of practice. We've built this sangha together for almost ten days now, and we can really sense that deepening—everyone's really in there cooking, as Rebecca says. It's great. So have a wonderful day of deepening the practice and stepping into that going in.

CHAPTER 12

Releasing The Thinking Mind

Patricia Genoud-Feldman · 1h00

> *In this profound dharma talk, Patricia Genoud-Feldman addresses one of meditation's most challenging territories: working skillfully with the thinking mind. Drawing from the Diamond Sūtra's instruction to "develop a mind that clings to nothing," she illuminates how thoughts themselves are not the problem—rather, it is our identification with and clinging to them that creates suffering.*
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> *The talk explores several key insights about thinking: how much time we spend lost in thought without realizing it, how thinking typically centers on self-referencing, and how we mistake concepts for reality. Patricia shares teachings from Sayadaw U Tejaniya on maintaining proper attitude toward thoughts—recognizing that the wandering mind isn't the problem, but our reactive relationship to it is. She distinguishes between the conceptual layer of experience and direct actuality, using examples from bodily sensations and everyday activities to illustrate how we can meet experience more intimately.*
>
> *Practical guidance is offered for working with obsessive thinking and strong emotions, including when to shift attention from thoughts to underlying bodily sensations. Patricia emphasizes that awareness itself remains untainted by whatever arises—like a clear sky unaffected by passing clouds. The talk concludes with the Buddha's teaching that with our thoughts we make the world, pointing toward both personal liberation and our capacity to benefit others through purifying our own minds.*

The path that we're on, the whole of the Buddhist teaching, is an invitation to be present and to see clearly for one sole purpose. I'll use a quote tonight to describe the purpose of the practice. This is from the Diamond Sutra: "Develop a mind that clings to nothing." Develop a mind that doesn't cling at all. And out of that non-clinging, non-grasping, the whole of the Dhamma, the whole of the truth, will just unfold.

This is really the reason for our gathering here—to truly understand the non-grasping mind and how it unfolds. To do that, we need to understand the workings of the mind, of the body, of the heart.

One of the areas that is particularly challenging, at least for myself, and I think from hearing some of you as well, is to work with and understand, to be aware of, the area of thoughts. Tonight I'd like to express a few ideas about the mindfulness of thinking.

I think that with this way of practice, which is more open—where we don't immediately cut a thought away and return to our anchor, the breath for many of us—we might have a little bit of uncertainty about how to be with and relate to this aspect of practice, even though as meditators we may notice that we spend a lot of time in that area. We spend so much time experiencing thinking. Therefore, it's quite important to establish a wholesome relationship with thoughts, one that will be healthy rather than one where we're taken away.

I know that for myself, thinking has often been a huge source of suffering in my early practice—really getting overwhelmed by all these thoughts that were emerging. They were like waves carrying me away, and I really didn't know how to deal with them until I began to experience for myself how to relate in a wise way.

When we begin practice, sitting here, we discover true insights about thoughts. One insight, which Joseph spoke of recently, is to really notice how much time we actually spend in thinking. If we were living our ordinary life without hearing the Buddha's teachings, we wouldn't even know that this can be a source of suffering.

A second insight is that when we're not present, thinking often means we're lost in the past, lost in the future, or even evaluating the present. You can be here, truly trying to relate to the present moment, and yet there's this commentary, this constant evaluation about what the experience is. This is not really being present to the thoughts themselves.

The third insight, at least for myself, is that the content of our thoughts is truly often, if not always, all about me, me, and me. I love Bhante Gunaratana. He says the best song that we have is "me, me, me, me, I, I, I, my, mine, mine, mine." And it's so true that this is happening in the area of thoughts—a lot of self-referencing. Even when we think about somebody else, it really is happening in relationship to me. How revealing and interesting this is.

This is from Wei Wu Wei: "Why are you so unhappy? Because 99.9% of everything you do and think is for yourself, and there isn't one."

That's exactly it. If you really sense this in your own experience, notice that we are in that relationship. No wonder there's pain.

Thinking is just a natural function of the mind. It really is the function—we can say brain, I'll say mind here. Just like the eyes see, the ears hear, the tongue tastes, the nose smells, and the body feels. It's function. When we understand that, there's already an ease. In the Buddhist teaching, it's the sixth sense door, and it's just a sense door.

It takes us quite a long time, I think, in practice to integrate the understanding that meditation is not thinking about being a better person or improving ourselves or analyzing and understanding. Even though this happens, it's not the aim, it's not the purpose of meditation. We slowly come to understand and establish a new kind of relationship that has to do with what we call direct experience, the actuality of the experience. And that really gives great ease with thoughts.

What does that mean? It means that we relate to thought from the place of attention, really from that place of awareness. What does it mean to relate to thoughts from that place of awareness? It means that we're not getting caught in the thoughts, and we're not pushing them away either.

How are we aware without getting caught and without pushing away? What it also means is that we're not getting involved in the story, in the content of thoughts. And yet we're very present. Thinking is here. We don't need to push away thoughts. So how is that possible? It's not our usual ordinary way of being.

What happens here is that we're interested in a bigger picture, meaning that we are seeing the process within which thoughts are happening. In our ordinary way, we are so interested in the content, what the thoughts have to say. So often we have a wrong understanding and think that we shouldn't have thoughts, that thoughts are a burden to our practice, that they hinder the quality of presence. And it's not true. It's really giving them too much credit in a way, giving them too much power to think that they can hinder the awareness. And yet we don't follow them either, meaning that we don't feed the story.

I think that we do this in meditation, in retreat. In our ordinary lives, there's no way that we'll have the space, at least at the beginning, to really relate because we don't pay attention. We're not paying attention enough so that the naturalness of awareness is the place from which experience is happening. We spend most of our life thinking—I'm sure you agree with that—and we don't even realize that thoughts govern most of our actions. It's so powerful. I was so enthused when I was given this teaching of noticing intention that leads to action, noticing how wise one can be if we see the thoughts that we might not always put into action. Not all thoughts are wise. You can agree with me. And therefore, there's a possibility of restraint, of seeing that intention: Oh, what's that next thought going to be like? Where is it bringing me?

What happens is that we really get caught in different types of stories that we tell ourselves. We get caught in stories about who we are, how we aren't good enough. There's a lot of "me" in here. For a long time I carried this sense of unworthiness, that I

wasn't good enough. And how painful that was, just because of the belief in certain types of experience. I felt that I needed to make up for that goodness, and that if I was who I was, I would never be happy.

One belief: when I was small, a teenager, I really understood that I was not going to get very tall, that I am not a very tall person. And in my teenage years, it was a real cause of suffering. I got over it. But it's so true—being the smallest one in the classroom, at the gym. There were so many things conditioning that belief and that story that was hurting me. Stories that reinforce our sense of dis-ease or disenchantment. How much is the judgment "I'm not good enough"? That judging mind can take so many forms, and we each have our own self-judgment. It really is painful coming from a thought. The judging mind is nothing else than a thought.

Or we get caught in stories about why it's someone else's fault that our lives are so miserable, that we live in this particular way because of someone else. I was seven years old, and I remember getting punished by my mom because I didn't show her my notebook where my grades were—because they weren't good. So I was hiding them. And of course she found them because she hadn't signed the notebook. I got punished and could not go to summer camp that year. What an imprint it left on my mind—that feeling of being so different, separate from my friends, really being not worthy. It stays with us. It creates a certain conditioning. Some events in our past really are the causes for stories we still may tell ourselves today, even if they happened forty or forty-five years ago. It doesn't matter how long ago. There's something that is still lingering.

One of my teachers, to whom I would really relate these emotions—you can sense that thoughts are linked to emotions and that they're not separate from our whole being—had very good advice.

Ask me to question my thoughts, to question the stories. Is this story that is manifesting real? Is it really true? Meaning, does it correspond to the reality of today, of now? And of course it doesn't. And it wakes us up to that reality of really seeing what is the truth today, rather than staying in the whirlwind of believing the story.

Now what is happening, and what is so true in our experience here, is that we are moving away from the words themselves. We're moving away from the concepts. Words are just concepts. And those concepts are simply tools—they're really helpful for our daily life. But in the process of awakening to our reality, it's really important to see that they're just pointers to describe a part of our experience. They're not the thing themselves.

And so then we begin to understand that the concepts really don't describe the truth, the deeper reality. Therefore, we pay closer attention and we live our lives more fully in the moment rather than lingering constantly in the past. This enables us to really get over it. I really sensed, oh, this is a possibility of getting over the emotional state that happened at age seven. Not helpful to keep it going.

In a very simple example, we can really notice how we know the past, and how we bring the past into the present moment. It doesn't have to be this huge emotional story. We already probably know what an orange or an apple tastes like. So when we have an apple, we don't really notice the shape, the color, the texture, what it looks like. We eat it and we're thinking of something else while it's happening. There's a disconnection there from our actual experience. And then we understand how it is that we miss that moment if we're not paying attention with mindfulness. Because if we're not present when we're completely in that action of eating that fruit, then something doesn't feel quite right. We feel disconnected. That is quite simple to understand, isn't it?

I remember when I was presented with exotic fruits, the first time that I went to Asia. There was this fruit that I had not known at all. And there was so much interest suddenly because I had not seen it ever before. I had not known the taste, didn't know what it looked like, if it had little grains inside, what the texture was. And suddenly this rising of interest came up. And I thought, look at how you're interested. And why is it that when you see an orange or an apple, you're really not present for that experience? Just because since forever we know what an apple tastes like. That's the concept. In the actuality of the experience, it's the first time that we'll eat that orange or that apple.

So there's the conceptual layer of our lives, and then there's the reality that can really be found on retreat. And that's what we're inclining towards, just moment after moment.

The concept of pain is very present, and I'm sure in all of you. Isn't it true that when we're sitting all these periods of time, long sitting, unpleasant sensations will come up? They're bound to come up. It's part of the body experience—perhaps the legs. And then we tell ourselves, "Oh, my legs hurt. There's pain here." It seems like it's a very solid thing. This pain is something that will last forever. For the three months I'm going to have this pain. We may become frightened about it. We can have all these kinds of thoughts: that it's going to permanently damage my body, that we're not going to be able to even go into the next walking because it really is very painful. Maybe we're going to need surgery. We're going to have all these thoughts that really frighten us. It's amazing how the thinking pattern goes on.

If we don't see it, we get caught. That's the story about pain.

Now what happens if we let go of that concept "pain" and look more closely at the experience, at the sensations themselves? Something very different happens in the actuality of the experience. It's not so solid anymore. It's this constant vibration and change, tightness and sharpness. And really, we are meeting the actuality of the experience, the reality.

What happens to the concept "pain"? What happened to the story? In that motion, in that experience of really meeting what's there, the story is just put to the side. We're not interested in it. It may be that it still lingers, but we're noticing it. We're not only at a distance looking—we're meeting the actuality of experience, which in this case I'm taking as bodily sensation.

So we have this paradox. You know, thinking is a really essential tool. It's very helpful. It's extremely important that we are able to think, and we've been educated to think. So much of our learning happens around thinking well. That's what you do with children as soon as they can hear words—you teach them concepts. And yet thinking is such an impediment to experiencing our lives fully.

So the practice is to recognize that experience of getting caught in thought and learn how to relate to thinking in a different way. That's really one of the first steps.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya says this about the thinking mind: "When the mind is thinking or wandering, just be aware of it. Thinking is a natural activity of the mind. You are doing well if you are aware that the mind is thinking. But if you feel disturbed by thoughts, or if you have a reaction or judgment of them, there's a problem with your attitude. The wandering mind is not the problem. Your attitude that they should not be around is the problem. So understand that you have just become aware of some functions of the mind. These too are just objects for your attention. Thinking is a mental activity. You should not try to watch thinking continuously. Neither should you try to avoid observing thoughts by immediately going to your primary meditation object. When you realize that you are thinking, always pay attention to the thought first, and then remind yourself that a thought is just a thought. Do not think of it as 'my thought.'"

So that is really the first step. Recognizing that we're caught in thinking requires understanding the various forms that thoughts can take. How do thoughts emerge? We can really notice the different experiences. Of course, there are words, but there are also vibrations—like an energetic felt sense that is happening. Thoughts can be judgments. They can be images. They can even be sounds. I don't know if many of you have had songs emerge in the mind, just as a way that they keep us company. But sounds that we play in our heads are just thoughts.

The particular form that thoughts take will depend somewhat on our conditioning. I've seen for myself that it really depends on what we've been exposed to. If I've listened to music before entering retreat, that's what will show up. If we listen to a lot of music, then when the mind becomes quiet, that's what comes up. If we write poetry or we've been writing a lot before coming, then that is simply what will arise. We'll be very creative in our stories. Maybe we'll even write a novel because that's the tendency of the mind. They're all forms of thoughts.

The Buddha really reflected on how it is that we mistake thoughts for reality. And he taught that we need to see it as clinging. Clinging just happens—as a way that we cling not only to the thoughts themselves, but we believe them to be *my* thoughts. There's an addition of "me," of personality. This is *my* story. And I think that Ajahn Sumedho in his recording last night really emphasized this very well. I won't go into personality because that's exactly what happens when thinking is really emerging and we take it so personally.

But that force of clinging with the thoughts is just so important to see.

As I was reflecting on this talk this afternoon, I had laundry to do. I took the laundry out of the dryer, and it was this big attached bundle of clothes. I thought, "Wow, they're really clinging to one another." It was just so interesting because of the magnetic force. As I was trying to pull the clothes apart, it was like Velcro—they were sticking to one another because of the force of stickiness. And I thought, that's exactly what happens with thoughts, just like our clothes stuck together.

If we really closely look at our minds, we can see that most of our conditioning, that attraction to thoughts, comes from that clinging, that source of really getting caught. We're fascinated by our thoughts. That's what happens. If there's clinging, there's so much fascination because thoughts can lead us into great imagination. Sometimes there's really more interest in the imaginary life than in reality. That's why thoughts have such a strong force.

Now, another way of talking about getting caught by thought is the word *identification*. You've heard that word, which is exactly the same as clinging or grasping—being identified with a thought. It just means that we're caught in it. And what are we caught in? We're caught in the content. We're caught in believing what we are thinking about. "This is who we are. This is what is happening."

And so then we begin to learn how to recognize, how to relate to thoughts in a different way. Of course, what you'll probably think is, "If I believe the thoughts, if there's content and I really get caught in it, then I need to do something." And the solution

seems to be to not think. So often in our practice, we try not to think. That solves the problem, doesn't it? It's an idea that we have, a belief. But meditation, as Sayadaw U Tejaniya said, doesn't mean that we're not supposed to be thinking. The wandering mind, the thoughts—these are just normal. It's a function of the mind.

So it's really important to see how we can get frustrated and judging of our own mind when we think that thoughts should not be happening. And what does that create? Give you a guess—just more thoughts. The judging mind about not wanting thoughts to emerge just creates more thoughts.

So what is the way? Instead of trying to stop thinking, the practice is to let go. To let go of what? The clinging. To stop the clinging or identification. And how do we do that? By meeting our thoughts with mindfulness. That's not a very great surprise, is it? And yet, we are not usually meeting our thoughts with mindfulness. We're meeting them with reactivity. And that's exactly what Sayadaw says—there's pushing away or holding on if it's pleasant. There's some involvement there.

So the practice in letting go, in stopping the clinging, is really allowing the thoughts to be met with mindfulness. What we begin to do is practice mindfulness of thinking, just like we practice mindfulness of walking—holding that intention to recognize thoughts just as thoughts. And when we're caught, we're bringing mindfulness to the reactivity.

This process of recognition takes a while. That's why we're here. It really does take practice. And I think it's probably one of the areas where we need the most patience, because of the emotional components that are often linked to the thought process.

It's not that we just have these bubbles floating in the air. There's a whole mind and body process that works together. So we may get caught in a thought, and when we're mindful of a thought, many more thoughts may develop from it before we recognize that we're caught. And that's okay, because that moment of recognition is already a moment of mindfulness. That's really important.

So it's not that we need to look and say, "Oh no, mindfulness isn't working, I'm still having this thought." No, it's really a process of enabling one to stay focused on recognizing all these thoughts that may emerge. Even if there are more thoughts, the power of mindfulness strengthens. It strengthens the tendency for mindfulness to arise rather than the tendency for thoughts to arise when we're not mindful.

When this strengthening of mindfulness arises, what happens? It's a weakening of the tendency to identify with thought. And so it's trusting awareness. Sayadaw U Tejaniya says again and again, stay on the side of strengthening mindfulness. Don't worry

about the thoughts that are present. Just continue to strengthen your mindfulness. As we continue to do this, concentration, coming from more and more moments of mindfulness, strengthens. It will be easier, and we'll recognize the thinking process more quickly.

Now, if this process takes a while, you might see in the relationship to your practice that you're caught in a judgment phase—a judgment about yourself, thinking that you're not practicing well enough because thoughts are still present. It's important to recognize that judgment is just another thought. The judging mind is so often present. It's so sticky. And yet it's nothing else than a thought.

Here I think that mental noting, at least for my own practice, is really helpful. Because then we are truly identifying what is emerging. We plant a seed of noticing really carefully: What is this? Is it commentary? Then I'm commenting. Is it judging? Then there is the label of judging. To really notice for a while, for some time, for the purpose of seeing clearly—this brings in that strengthening of awareness. It strengthens mindfulness.

And remembering that mindfulness is free of judgment. We bring that awareness which is free of judgment, which is like a mirror-like reflection of what is happening. Oh, self-reference, self-judgment—that's what it is. It's just that. Awareness can still be present. So it's bare of commentary or storytelling when mindfulness is present. It will infuse just what is present.

Why is this so important? Because we stop then trying to manipulate, to fabricate, to create, to do something, to think that it's wrong. We're simply able to be with what is necessary. And no more effort is needed than that.

Now, it's hard to believe. There's always the thought, "Oh, but there must be more that I need to do." No. If you do more, then you just emphasize more of the clinging. So we're not trying to make thoughts go away. We're not trying to make them last either. Neither one.

When we do that, thoughts will reveal their impermanent nature. Thoughts come and go. It's extraordinary when there begins to be a space between thoughts. If the conditioning for a thought to arise is strong enough, then of course it's going to rise again. And maybe there's a new thought that will reveal more mindfulness. Maybe a thought will itself reveal the mindfulness. It's quite amazing to see that thought can nurture the value of mindfulness itself.

We can also make the mind very spacious, very open. Opening that focus of mindfulness allows us to give space to the thinking mind. It's amazing.

If you open your eyes now, notice how we narrow the focus. We see forms, shape. You probably see me, Joseph, Annie, the ocean—all the objects. Form and color. But how about just focusing on the space in the room? Just allowing that to be the main focus: space.

We still see forms and color, and yet there's this sense of really noticing how the mind is resting back. Do you notice how, when you're allowing that spaciousness—the space in the room to be known, not focusing so much on people, color, and form—it gives this sense of resting back? We can do this with awareness. It allows for a kind of letting go of clinging, of leaning forward. Resting. Do you sense that a little bit?

In that spaciousness, there's a possibility of openness. It really is like giving a great pasture to the horse instead of keeping them tight in. That's what we need to do with thoughts—really allowing thoughts to be present. And it doesn't prevent awareness. Quite the contrary. There's an awareness of that spaciousness. Thoughts are there, they're not there. They come, they go. They arise, they vanish. The space is still present. Awareness is always here. The mindfulness is not vanishing with the thoughts, is it? You can really see that as you're fully recognizing, in the present moment, awareness itself. At times we can just stay present to awareness and really have that as the main focus.

This is from Master Dōgen: "Coming, going, the water birds don't leave a trace, don't follow a path."

Coming, going, the thoughts don't leave a trace, don't follow a path. And it's so true that thoughts don't follow a path unless there's clinging, where we invite—and there's an invitation then—to a story. But so many times there's a thought, and if you're really mindful, the thought is gone, vanished. There's a moment of space. There's a moment of real clarity and wisdom. And that often is the place for more awareness, for trusting awareness.

Awareness is the refuge. There isn't any moment where awareness will vanish. We can really trust the mystery, moving towards the unknown.

Now, at times, these thoughts create a lot of suffering. And that's when a thought added to another thought creates a story. When we really believe it, when we're so attached to the story, there's a hurt. There's often an emotional component, and it doesn't feel empty then. It doesn't feel spacious at all. It really feels like obsessive thinking.

You probably have had that—where all day long it's the same old record, the same old CD playing. We've known that story out of habit so many times. And the question may come up: why is it still present? We've dealt with this so many, many times. That happens in practice because there's a way that we are purifying the heart and mind. Obsessive thinking emerges when there's a charge in the body of strong emotion.

And here, Sayadaw U Tejaniya has an advice for us.

He says, "It doesn't matter whether thinking stops or not. It is more important that you understand whether your thoughts are skillful or unskillful, appropriate or inappropriate, necessary or unnecessary. This is why it is essential to learn to watch thinking without getting involved. When a thought keeps growing, no matter how much effort you put into trying to simply observe it, you are probably somehow involved in the thought. When this happens, when thinking becomes so incessant that you can no longer observe it, stop looking at the thoughts and try to watch the underlying feelings or bodily sensations instead."

This is wise action. Why is it? Because if there is a real long story that we're caught in, it really means that there's a resistance. There's something which needs to be seen in the field of the felt sense of resistance—the body, the mind, and the link between body and mind, the emotions in the mind, the emotions in the body. And to really attend to ourselves in a way that we feel comfortable with it. Again, not to push away, but really to be very, very gentle and soft. It's to meet the resistance with an attitude of not at all pushing away.

If there's wanting or there's aversion in relationship to that story, we allow those feelings of reactivity to be met just for what they are. How does aversion feel? Is there pressure, tightness in the chest? Or maybe it's the belly. Really cultivating a sense of presence to the pain that is happening, the emotional knots, and holding a sense of mettā is very helpful because it will just soften. Mettā is pure kindness. And rather than reacting towards, there's this wholesome intention of meeting what is, and it changes the landscape. We're no longer in avoidance, but really relating to resting back and receiving, and noticing then the impact of that relationship.

So it may be useful at times to, like Sayadaw says, move away from the thinking process, from watching the thinking mind, and again come back and use the power of mindfulness in relationship to bodily sensations. Noticing often the energy with which we practice, really noticing if it's an energy of aversion, of pushing away—then definitely this needs to be seen. Because it really just reinforces the pain, rather than allowing the healing, the tendency to not get so anxious about it.

Often in relationship to this, fear shows up. And fear is okay. As Joseph said the other morning to a person, we can be with fear as long as we're not completely overwhelmed. We're working in the field of really allowing some tenderness here. And of course, wisdom. But meeting fear allows us to really be at the edge of what we have already known, the known that we know so well, and to explore that area which is not yet known to us.

A yogi not long ago, not in this retreat but this summer in Israel, said, "I just hate being here on retreat. All that I see all day long is a pile of garbage." She said, "That pile of garbage just accumulates in my mind. An endless flow of horrible thoughts that come up and make me remember only one thing. And that one thing is all the bad stuff that I've done in my life."

You can imagine that. It's really quite touching to have a person come up and say that. And it requires our deepest tenderness to practice. Maybe it's not to that extent, and yet there are times when we really need to be soft and gentle. In practice this will happen. Unresolved issues do show up just because we're so much with ourselves. And sometimes the vividness of the pain shows us that we are in a process of purification.

We see this process just for what it is. Allowing the thoughts to be seen just for thoughts, emotions just for emotions—this is it, and it's not mine or me—then of course there's more ease. And there's a cleansing that happens. I think it's so important to not be afraid of what can show up, because all of it is a passing show. It's a process due to certain conditions. And we are really healing, purifying this mind and body process. This is all that is happening, until we really sense that reinforcement of liberation, of non-clinging. Aversion will show up. Desire will show up.

And they're just to be seen for what they are.

So there's nothing in the context of the practice that should not show up. You see, that's exactly what she thought. She said, "Oh, but I can't even report this. I feel so bad about myself. It's unwholesome." And in the process of practice, it's really important to allow those yucky and unpleasant mind states to show up because we're in the process of purification. It's not about running away because something is unwholesome. We don't have the intention to deliberately bring these things up, yet if they show up, we hold them with the wholesome intention of understanding that this is a process of purification, and that we don't need to avoid those thoughts and emotions.

Bhante Gunaratana says, "Somewhere in this process, you will come face to face with the sudden, shocking realization that you're completely crazy. Your mind is a shrieking, gibbering madhouse on wheels, barreling pell-mell down the hill, utterly out of control

and hopeless." He says, "No problem. You are not crazier than you were yesterday. It has always been this way, but you never noticed. Now at least you know it and you can begin to learn."

And it's true. Some of our parts carry a lot of shame or a lot of blame. It's a humbling process, yet it's a deeply true process—that we come so intimately close to the truth, seeing that it's not at all me, and yet being completely intimate. That's a funny thing, isn't it? That's how liberation comes about. We get to know our craziness, our stupidity, our shame, our blame, our fears—all of it. All of it can be seen, and we'll see it probably over and over. Thank goodness there are moments of peace, of joy, of tranquility! Otherwise we would really go insane. But there is a part of our practice that truly reinforces the seeing of those parts we don't feel so worthy of. And we understand that it's just the process. If we don't grasp—and that is why wisdom is so foundational—we allow ourselves to understand that it's just a process.

Jamgon Kongtrul, the Tibetan Lama, says, "If you follow or get lost in any thought or emotion and let your mind wander outwardly, your work is in error and you are not different from any ordinary person. Turn your attention right in and look right at your mind. When you look at it, nothing is seen. Relax. Let everything be and rest in that state. No matter how many thoughts or emotions there are, when they aren't grasped, they go freely on their own and become pure awareness."

So on one level, we really see the shadow side. On another level, we can totally relax, because thoughts and emotions don't have any effect on awareness itself. Awareness is totally pure. Thoughts are not at all tainting the quality of awareness. It's just like if you leave a glass of muddy water quite still, without shaking it, without moving it, the dirt will simply settle to the bottom. And so we allow our thoughts to really settle very naturally in a state where there's no interference.

The process itself is one of letting go of clinging. Not fighting against, not wanting to get rid of, not suppressing—just recognizing, relaxing, and allowing awareness, allowing mindfulness to do the job.

We can say, in a way, that the thoughts are the clouds, the moving mind, and awareness is the sky. Thoughts come and go; they're in motion. That clarity of the blue sky is always present. Awareness is not at all affected by the thoughts. Whatever their creation, whatever the fabrication we make around them, it's just a fabrication. They don't have any intrinsic reality. And that is just so extraordinary to understand.

So this is the working of the mind. And as we train ourselves to look at what is present, we actually see again and again that we have a choice—that we can choose to continue to be lost in fantasy, or we can choose to cultivate a wholehearted presence that helps us make wise choices.

What we see here we will bring outwardly into our life. With that purity of intention, simply clarifying the natural state of the mind again and again, we allow ourselves to have a wholesome relationship to ourselves—one where there's more ease, more awareness, more understanding. And with that, we lift the veil of ignorance. Then we act in the world from that space of greater wisdom, of greater understanding.

From that space of knowing, action arises. And that is just so amazing—that it's all happening through the understanding of our own minds. It's encouraging for the world today that there are so many people interested in really looking a little more intimately at what is going on.

These lines from the Buddha: "We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. Speak or act with an impure mind and trouble will follow you. Speak or act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you."

So we're really in this process of understanding—meaning that we really understand the relationship to the thinking mind and how it purifies itself with awareness. That's a very clear statement from the Buddha. Therefore, we can help ourselves, and we can help the world. And that's amazing. It's an amazing capacity of consciousness. This is the gift of the practice.

May we rejoice in the fact of being able to see clearly and to nurture those qualities that will lead to liberation, to awakening.

CHAPTER 13

Impermanence: The Great Teacher

Myoshin Kelley · 1h02

> *In this profound dharma talk from the 2007 three-month retreat at IMS, Myoshin Kelley illuminates why so many great Buddhist masters have emphasized impermanence (anicca) as the most essential contemplation. Drawing from the Buddha's final words—"Subject to decay are all conditioned things"—she weaves together teachings from diverse traditions, including Suzuki Roshi's summation of Buddhism as simply "impermanence," Ajahn Chah's repeated reminder "it's not permanent, it's not certain," and Patrül Rinpoche's instructions from Words of My Perfect Teacher.*
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> *Kelley shares the enlightenment poem of Mittakālī, a nun from the Buddha's time who struggled for years before awakening through watching "the elements of mind and body rise and fall away." She explores why intellectual understanding of impermanence isn't sufficient—we must develop direct, intuitive realization through practice. The talk examines how we selectively accept impermanence when it's convenient (unpleasant experiences passing) while resisting it when pleasant states change or loved ones leave.*
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> *The teaching addresses our relationship to aging bodies, the death of loved ones, and even planetary impermanence, drawing from the Buddha's equanimous response to his chief disciples' deaths. Kelley shares her own experience of facing what she believed was imminent death, and how this shattered her tendency to postpone practice. She offers the Simile of the Mountain Sutta's guidance: when death approaches from all directions, live by the Dhamma, act wholesomely, and tend to this moment with full presence. Through understanding impermanence, we discover the peace of the non-grasping mind.*

The world around us and within us is constantly teaching us when we have the eyes to see, the ears to listen, and are able to perceive without distortion—to really allow the mind to relax and receive experience as it is.

The lessons come in all kinds of forms, all kinds of ways. One of the lessons that's so evident as we practice here during this time is that of impermanence. The season, this time of year, it's there right before our eyes when we're outside looking and seeing. Seeing the leaves changing, turning color, falling. Seeing plants decay, wither, and die. It's a great support to our understanding of impermanence, a fact of life.

When we are able to translate that experience, to know that the laws that govern nature are the same laws that govern this mind and body, we see it in the world around us. And yet we may not fully realize that this truth of impermanence is an understanding that can lead us to liberation. The implications of this understanding can transform our lives and the way we live them.

There have been, over time, many great teachers who have hammered on this truth. I know my teachers have done it to me, so I know there's really truth in this. They keep pointing toward it.

Suzuki Roshi, a great Zen master, was once asked to put Buddhism in a nutshell. He responded by saying simply: impermanence. It really is such an important teaching.

One of Ajahn Chah's famous lines—he was a very revered Thai forest monk—was "It's not permanent, it's not certain." He said it so many times that some people would leave because they wanted to find something certain. They were looking for some assurance that things would be a particular way. And as they'd leave, he'd say, "Well, they'll be back." We have to find out for ourselves.

There's another teacher who lived in the nineteenth century, a Tibetan teacher named Patrul Rinpoche. He wrote a wonderful book called *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, and in this book, he too hammered on impermanence. He quoted from Geshe Potowa, who was once asked: if a person could only choose one practice out of the many different practices offered in the various traditions and Buddhist teachings, what would the most important practice be? The answer: contemplation of impermanence.

Geshe Potowa says, "At first, meditation on impermanence makes you develop faith. In the middle, it's conducive to diligence in your practice. And in the end, it helps you give birth to wisdom."

The Buddha was once asked by Ananda, his attendant, "Venerable Sir, it would be good if the Blessed One would teach me the Dharma in brief." Wouldn't you have loved to have asked the Buddha that? You can imagine just sitting there, waiting for that response, wondering what it would be. The Buddha responded by giving a short discourse on impermanence.

At the time of the Buddha's death, at the end of this life of many years of searching, realizing, and sharing his wisdom, as he lay there about to pass away, he said: "With the light of perfect wisdom, dispel the darkness of ignorance. Subject to decay are all conditioned things. Strive on with diligence."

Subject to decay are all conditioned things—his last words to us. There must be something in it.

And yet, when we look at our lives, in many ways we know it. We see it. You're not surprised when you walk outside and the leaves are falling. You're not surprised when day turns to night, when night turns to day.

We're not surprised at so many things in life. And yet, fully realizing this has the potential to release our hearts from suffering.

I'd like to share an enlightenment song that comes from a nun who lived in the time of the Buddha. Her name was Mitakali. Before she ordained, it was said that she was very angry and difficult, very self-centered. She actually ordained upon hearing the Satipatthana Sutta—the sutta out of which this practice that we're doing here comes. And she was, in many ways, just like us. She was one of the people who didn't get fully enlightened upon hearing the Buddha utter some phrase; she actually had to practice. She spent many years, years of struggle. Probably like some of us.

So this is her poem of enlightenment. I really wanted to share it because it so clearly expresses what was happening in her mind upon realization:

Although I left home for no home and wandered full of faith, I was still greedy for possessions and praise. I lost my way, my passions used me, and I forgot the real point of my wandering life. Then as I sat in my cell there was only terror. I thought this is the wrong way. A fever of longing controls me. Life is short. Age and sickness gnaw away. I have no time for carelessness before this body breaks. And as I watched the elements of mind and body rise and fall away, I saw them as they really are. I stood up. My mind was completely free. The Buddha's teaching has been done.

It sounds so simple. "And as I watched the elements of mind and body rise and fall away, I saw them as they really are. I stood up. My mind was completely free."

We sit here all day and we watch these same elements of mind and body rise and pass away again. Can we stand up and be completely free? Maybe some. I don't know. I'll make no assumptions. But quite likely many of us can't, or aren't in a place of being completely free.

So through this, we can see that to have just a conceptual, ordinary understanding of impermanence isn't enough, even though it's this great truth. We have to be able to live our lives from this place, live with the understanding of this truth. And that understanding comes through our direct experience, an intuitive understanding of this truth of impermanence.

In our lives, it's quite likely that impermanence is at times a convenient truth. When we have unpleasant experience and it passes away, we're happy for this truth. When it's our knee pain, back pain, when it's thoughts that we don't like and they cease. When it's somebody who's difficult for us—to maybe on retreat even see—and we don't see them, there can be a happiness in the truth of impermanence.

But this being okay with it has its limits. It's not okay when it's a sense of stable, deep concentration, and then, for whatever reasons, it changes, and we keep getting distracted. It's not okay when someone who has been very dear to us in our lives suddenly disappears, is no longer present. It's not okay when it's something in our world that we've been banking on for security, for a sense of happiness, something that keeps us feeling safe. And then it changes.

Speaking about all of the changing colors, which on one level are so beautiful, so touching—one fall I had a real reflection on this, driving along, seeing these colors. And then I looked at my skin, and I saw all these brown spots coming from aging. And it wasn't so beautiful when it was on my skin. There was a contraction that happened.

So we don't always live easefully with this truth of impermanence. There can be the wanting to deny it, avoid it, wanting not to see it. And it can often happen that when experience is pleasant, the way we like it, it's so easy to believe this is how it is, this is how it's going to stay. In our practice, we see it over and over again in those just-how-we-like-it sittings. "Now I've got it. I understand." It's so easeful.

It's like, what was the problem? It's gone. The struggle's gone. And the mind, subtly and sometimes not so subtly, believes, "Oh, yeah, it'll stay this way now. This is the exception." But it's not the exception. It will change.

This not understanding impermanence comes about because we live with the illusion of continuity when we don't have wise attention, when there isn't careful observation of what's unfolding. When we don't look closely, there isn't the recognition of just how quickly things change. And so experience takes on this appearance of being continual, continuous. It gives the illusion of permanence. This is one of the distortions of perception that I spoke about last week.

To really begin to see impermanence, we examine it directly—not as an overlay. We don't need to create impermanence; it's already there. But what happens is that when awareness begins to steady, this is what's revealed. This is what's seen.

It can be as simple as being with our knee pain. At first it seems like something solid, tight. It feels like just one pain. And then when the mind is relaxed and steady with the experience, we begin to see there are all kinds of sensations there. There's nothing

stable in it. It's all changing. We do this not just with body sensations but with everything that arises in our experience. And this really helps to inform us, gives us information that's useful, coming directly out of our own experience.

This is really important work. Because when we have lived by trying not to see impermanence, by continually looking for what will give us a sense of safety, what will give us a sense of permanence—one day that will be shattered, that will be broken. Because everything, all conditioned experience, is impermanent.

In our practice, we see both the way experiences arise and disappear. We also come in contact with our reactions to this, because there tends to be a lot of dis-ease with impermanence. On one level it's totally understandable. If we are identifying with experience and it's so unstable, then any sense of happiness, any sense of self that's hanging on that, is going to be rattled in the face of this fact of life.

The mind has all these stories, all these ideas of what would happen if we didn't hold on. What would happen if this seemingly stable ground becomes unstable? But they're just ideas. They're just concepts. It's not the truth of the way things are. And that's something we need to recognize.

In our practice, at times the seeing of impermanence can be so strong that we have a sense of just taking a step and the ground falling away from beneath our feet. There's this real sense that there's nothing stable there. And of course the mind, because in the past it was looking for stability through experience, will have ideas. But they're not true. We need to see the concepts we have about needing security in these experiences—and to know they're just concepts, to know they're just ideas.

There are consequences to not seeing impermanence. One consequence is that we take our lives for granted. Just look at being here on retreat. It's easy to just take for granted that there'll be an end to the retreat. We take for granted that when we get up in the morning, there'll be an end to the day. We take for granted that time will continue in the way that it has.

I've seen when I've been doing long retreats, getting up in the morning, there's a bit of a struggle and just this sense of, "Oh well, I won't really apply myself today. Tomorrow I'll feel better, and then I'll apply." There's this taking for granted that there is a tomorrow. I once had a teacher who said this over and over again.

He said, "Every day I tell you to wake up, and every day you say tomorrow."

When I was with him, I didn't really see that. I listened to it. But very shortly after I left the community where he was, I became very sick. As I was getting sicker and sicker, I kept imagining that I would live—first of all, it was for another month. And then it was for another couple of weeks. And then another week. And then one day, there was just this feeling: today's the day. Today's the day I'm going to die.

At that time, I had just a few friends around me. And so I really noticed—I would say something and their response would be, "Oh, tomorrow." And I could see this way of postponing. I was laying there just feeling like, I don't have tomorrow. This is what I have right now. And it had a very profound effect on me.

Now, obviously, I didn't die. I'm still here. But for a long time, people would, as happens in life, ask me to make plans. And at first, when people would talk about something in the future, my mind would go into a gap. I didn't know how to do it. How do you make plans? It seemed like writing a novel. And then I realized that I simply had to be ready to abandon whatever plans I made should circumstances change. But it was very profound to taste this.

Probably many of us have had similar experiences where there is some strong striking of impermanence. Sickness, feeling that death is close, is definitely a way that really wakes us up out of complacency. It helps us to arrive in the present moment. There was once a famous sage who was asked where all his wisdom came from. And he responded by saying, "I live as a man who, when he wakes up in the morning, doesn't know if he will be alive in the evening."

Just noticing, in your time here, is there a tendency to take the future for granted, as if there is a tomorrow? This isn't to throw us into fear, anxiety, grasping at this moment. We can really just recognize that that thought of the future is just a thought of the future. But it is in this moment that the potency is.

This is from Nagarjuna, a South Indian monk, philosopher, and mystic. He says, "Life flickers in the flurries of a thousand ills, more fragile than a bubble in a stream. In sleep, each breath departs and is again drawn in. How wondrous that we wake up living still."

It's interesting with impermanence to look and see in our experience where we tend to lapse into a belief of permanence. It may be different for each of us, but there are some common aspects of experience. One is that of relationships. We live in a world of interconnectedness. Our lives are made up of many different relationships. There can

be people on the periphery that we come in contact with—they come and they go and this is okay. But then there can also be people who are very dear to us, and it's much more difficult to accept this truth of impermanence.

We find that in the midst of the nourishment of these relationships, we again think this is something reliable, something that we will always be able to turn to, that brings stability to our lives and will continue to be so. But then change happens, and the change comes in many different ways. It could be simply our children growing up and leaving home. It could be through death. It could be through people changing, partners changing, having different needs. If we have been hanging on to that relationship in some way, believing it will always be there for us, we become devastated with this change. It brings great grief, sorrow, and we often tend to take it personally—that something's gone wrong, it's some mistake. And we suffer immensely in the face of it.

One aspect that happens in these relationships is that when someone has been dear to us, has been a central part in our lives—and sometimes that might not even mean the person's around a lot, but just knowing that they're alive in the world can bring great comfort—when they're gone, there's loss. And many times, because we haven't understood impermanence, we haven't practiced, haven't allowed the mind to register this sense of loss, we become broken by it.

This doesn't have to be the case. The loss will be there—it is a change in conditions, an absence. But when we understand impermanence, we know this is the way of things.

I'd like to share something from the life of the Buddha, because he had this wisdom, this understanding. It's said that at the time of the death of his two chief disciples, who were like his left and his right arm, he addressed the Sangha. He said, "Bhikkhus, this assembly appears to me empty now that Sariputta and Moggallana have attained final Nibbana. This assembly was not empty for me earlier."

He also went on to say, "It is amazing on the part of the Tathagata"—that's how he referred to himself—"that when such a pair of disciples has attained final nirvana, there is no sorrow or lamentation in the Tathagata." He experienced this loss, but there was no sorrow or lamentation. His understanding was so deep. He went on to say, "May what is born, come to be, conditioned, and subject to disintegration not disintegrate? That is impossible."

He could live his life from this place of understanding. I put that out just as a potential—to know that it is possible, by understanding impermanence, to face loss without being broken by it, knowing that this is in accordance with natural laws.

But it's also quite likely that we are still in the process of this understanding. And so I'd like to share another piece from the suttas that comes from Ananda, spoken after the Buddha died. This was a really significant year in the Buddhist world. There was the death of Sariputta and Moggallana, the two chief disciples. There was also a beloved king named Pasanadi who died within that year. And the Buddha passed away.

For Ananda, these were the central figures in his life—the people near and dear to him, the ones upon whom there was perhaps a sense of reliability. As I was reading this today, I was looking around at my own world. The image I had was as if suddenly all my teachers died, my fellow teachers. It would be profound. I'd have to do all the work. It would be profound.

And so this is what Ananda said: "My companions have passed away, the master too is gone. There is no friendship now that equals this—mindfulness directed to the body. The old ones now have passed away. The new ones do not please me so much. Today I meditate alone, like a bird gone to its nest."

He turned to his practice, his nest. This is what we can all turn to in moments where loss is strong—coming back to our nest. It's not going to be helpful if we think, "Oh, I shouldn't feel this. I should understand impermanence." We just turn to our practice.

Now, in our practice it may not be that we're facing such a big loss as the death of a loved one. And so it is the time where we can really practice with loss in any way, any way that it occurs during the day. I found it arising in really unexpected ways. I was having a lot of unpleasant experience once, and it disappeared. And there came this huge sense of loss. Surprising, but it can happen.

Who knows what that loss may be for you. It may be loss of a mind state. It may be loss of your favorite walking place. Maybe loss of some article of clothing that you put in the laundry. In any way it comes, when that loss is there, let your heart be vulnerable. Be present. We really need to see in our own experience the constructs we have around experience that keep us from touching into this truth.

This is a teaching from Ajahn Chah: "Conditions all go their own natural way. Whether we laugh or cry over them, they just go their own way. And there is no knowledge or science that can prevent the natural course of things."

You can get a dentist to look at your teeth, but even if he can fix them, they still finally go their natural way. Eventually, even the dentist has the same problem. Everything falls apart in the end.

So relationships, an aspect of experience—can we be conscious in this, entering into relationships not so enchanted by the promise of everlasting happiness, but with the wisdom of knowing that this too is impermanent?

Another aspect of impermanence that we can often struggle with is in relationship to our bodies. These bodies carry a strong sense of self with them—my body, the way it is, an image of this body. And if when we were young we attached to the idea of having a young, beautiful, healthy body, when change happens, it's going to create suffering.

I mentioned my brown aging spots. I also remember being young and finding a stretch mark—my first stretch mark. I was horrified. I went to my mother: "Mom, look at this! What is this?" And there was a sense that this was a tragedy. There are so many ways that our bodies will change. And this, if we have the right attitude, is a teacher. It's here to instruct us.

But of course, our culture doesn't help us with all of the advertisements that surround us. I was reading an advertisement once that said, "You don't have to grow old." And then we have all the anti-aging products—against aging. Sometimes, especially through health foods and the new age culture—not to diminish everything—there can come this belief that if we eat the right foods, if we exercise the right amount, that this body will be preserved in its fullest form. And yet, it's not the truth. There have been great doctors who had amazing diets that they professed and who died of cancer. That's not to say there wasn't something helpful in what they said, but to perpetuate the myth that we can defy this aging process, that we can defy death if we just get all the right ingredients—this isn't helpful and will only set up more struggle in our lives.

This aging process that we go through, if we view it with the right attitude—when you see another wrinkle, when another part begins to sag, whatever it might be—look at the reaction. Is it okay? Is it okay? We got the response: "No, it's not okay." Be with that. This is life speaking to us. Can we listen?

There are wonderful role models in the world who present something different than what the advertising world does. One was Sri Nisargadatta, a sage from India. He was once asked, "What's it like to be an old yogi?" He replied, "Oh, I just watch the memory decompose on an almost daily basis." And he roared with laughter.

We won't roar with laughter if we only have an intellectual understanding of impermanence. But when we see that this is the nature of this body, this is what bodies do, it's the way things are—it's okay. It doesn't mean we don't take care of this body, but its nature is conditioned.

The natural world has so helped me with this. Even as a young child, when everyone was denying suffering, going out into nature—just seeing how there was decay, there was sickness, death, there was impermanence—and it was the way of things. Nature just holds it with a grace, a grace that is possible for us when we have understanding.

We find that when we contemplate impermanence, when we come close to this, it's natural that we will also contemplate death. They are so linked, birth and death. This is what we see. We see in our practice: birth of a breath, death of a breath. Birth of a thought, death of a thought. And we see it in the greater picture of life—that what we're involved in is a dynamic process. It's not static.

This goes from everything on the largest level in life, just looking at the cosmos itself. I love opening my mind up to the stars, the sky, space. There's something about it that just opens some small perception of this little I, me, mine. Just opens. And there's this whole cosmos that's always changing.

Stars are dying. New galaxies are born. Everything exists in this state of flux. And right down to the microscopic level, things are being born and dying all the time.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama said about the awareness of death: "Awareness of death is the very bedrock of the path. Until you have developed this awareness, all other practices are obstructed."

We can have such deeply seated fear about death that we don't even let the mind come in contact with it. When we touch into it in our lives, we simply move on. We fill up space. We don't let it be touched. Just listening to myself talk tonight, I can see why when we come on retreat, sometimes it just feels enormous—some of the feelings that we're having. These are feelings we have been so skillful at avoiding. But we're allowing them to surface, doing so with awareness.

Getting back to death and how this unfolds: being born means that one day we will die. This is so hard to grasp. We've only known the world with us in it. I remember being a small child and saying to my mom, "Mom, what was the world like before I was born?" The interesting piece was that I then tried to imagine the world without me. But even though we see death around us, it's still really hard to get that this mind-body experience as we know it will cease to be.

I was watching a news program where a soldier was being interviewed. He was part of a division of the army where a lot of his peers, a lot of people he was with, had been killed. He was asked how he was able to cope with this, and he replied by saying that

the only way he could continue to go out and fight each day was to believe that it would never happen to him. It's not unique to him—we often live believing it will never happen to us.

Annie mentioned last night as a reflection that's helpful to bring up energy in our practice: to reflect on death can bring up energy. It also brings us in contact with whatever feelings we may have around that. And I don't know about you, but I certainly would rather face that now than be on my deathbed and suddenly have these fears surface. That's why our practice can be so helpful. It can really help us to have the tools to face death without fear—or if fear arises, to have some sense of how to be with that.

There's another form of death that in my own life I came to see seems even stronger than the fear of my own death: the death of this dearly loved planet. It's hard for me to really be in a place of acceptance of this. When I think of loss of my own life, that's one piece. But this planet, which is home to so many forms of life, that has nourished and sustained—to think that one day this too will be gone. It's been a very powerful reflection.

One time after the events of 9/11, I was sitting, quite in a state of shock. I did something that I often do when there's uncertainty, when I'm looking for something that will help me frame my experience in some way: I opened up the suttas. As I opened them that day, my eyes fell upon this line—it was the Buddha speaking—and he said, "One day, O monks, this world will end." When I read that, I slammed the book shut. It was so close to the bone that day. I wasn't ready to go there. I just kept sitting there in a state of shock, feelings arising.

A little while later, I said, okay, I'll open the book again. Maybe it'll be more encouraging this next time. So I opened the book to a distinctly different spot, and my eyes fell down again. The question was being asked, "What happens when a world system ends?" It was a moment of disbelief right then. And then the response was: "Beings are usually reborn in the deva realm of streaming radiance." It sounded a little more promising.

But what struck me in reading those passages was, again, this sense of matter-of-factness, this mind equanimous in the face of that. And it reminded me of the Zen master with whom I've practiced, Roshi John Daido Loori. One day in speaking with him, he said, "We live on a dying planet." When he said that, he said it with full equanimity.

And he didn't say it by way of a statement of doom and gloom. He didn't say it by way of resignation. He is a man who is fully alive. He expresses compassionate action in the way he lives his life. He has petitioned the Japanese government. He's an activist in his own life. But he could say, "We live on a dying planet," because he has this understanding that all conditioned things are of the nature to decay.

After 9/11, and reading these couple of suttas very soon after, I found myself on intensive retreat. I was in this place of feeling how uncertain life is, how quickly conditions can change in our life. I sat with my own dis-ease, my own distress with that, and I came across another sutta which was so helpful to me. It's called the Simile of the Mountain. The question was posed: What should one do when from all directions death is approaching? Sometimes in our life, we may have this sense that death is all around us. It's coming. What should we do?

And the answer was: As aging and death are rolling in on you, what else should be done but to live by the Dhamma, to live righteously, and to do wholesome and meritorious deeds? We live in accordance with the way things are, honoring this moment, living with a wholeheartedness that tends to this moment, but understands that the experiences, the circumstances are all subject to change.

So our practice helps us to see this truth of impermanence. In any moment, it reveals itself, shows itself. Letting it become a deeply rooted and realized understanding that becomes the basis out of which we live our life. When we deeply understand it, we are not left grasping, trying to make permanent that which by its very nature is impermanent. We're no longer trying to do the impossible. One yogi once said to me, "You know, it's as if I've been betting on the wrong horse all my life." And that's all it is. And we come to know the mind of non-grasping, non-clinging.

This is again from Ajahn Chah: "When the mind starts to realize that all things without exception are by their very nature uncertain, the problem of grasping and attachment start to decrease and wither away. If we understand this, the mind starts to let go and put things down. Not grasping onto things, attachment can come to an end. When it comes to an end, one must reach the Dhamma. There is nothing beyond this."

We come to know the peace of the non-grasping mind. This teaching that comes from many great masters, who have hammered it into us—can we look towards the truth of it in our own experience, moment by moment?

And this is from Patrul Rinpoche again: "Impermanence is everywhere, yet I still think things will last. I have reached the gates of old age, yet still I pretend I am young." I could really relate to that. "Bless me and misguided beings like me that we may truly understand impermanence."

May all beings come to know the truth of impermanence and the liberation that it leads to.

CHAPTER 14

Ten Unwholesome Actions

Joseph Goldstein · 1h04

> *In this comprehensive talk, Joseph Goldstein examines the Buddha's teaching on the ten unwholesome actions (akusala kamma) as outlined in the Dhammapada verse: "Refrain from unwholesome actions, do good, purify the mind—this is the teaching of all the Buddhas." Drawing from Śāntideva's observation that "we shrink from suffering but love its causes," Goldstein systematically explores how these teachings illuminate the path from suffering to genuine happiness.*
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> *The talk covers the three unwholesome actions of body (killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct), four of speech (lying, harsh speech, gossip, and useless talk or samphappalāpa), and three of mind (covetousness, ill will, and wrong view). Goldstein emphasizes that four of the ten actions involve speech, highlighting its often-underestimated role in both causing and alleviating suffering. He shares personal anecdotes and practical examples that make these ancient teachings accessible and relevant.*
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> *Particularly illuminating is the discussion of wrong view (micchā diṭṭhi), which includes both not understanding the law of kamma and the deeply conditioned belief in a permanent self. Goldstein addresses the subtle tendency to identify with awareness itself as a final refuge of self-view, offering the practical counsel to simply not cling to anything that arises. The talk concludes with verses from the Dhammapada on the sources of true happiness, framing ethical conduct not as restriction but as the foundation for freedom and well-being.*

The question I'd like to consider tonight is how we can be happy in our lives. How we can manifest our intentions of goodwill and loving kindness in our relationships, in our work situations, in our interactions with the world. The question really is how we connect our meditation practice with our lives.

In one verse of the Dhammapada, which is a collection of verses of the Buddhist teachings, the Buddha summed up all forty-five years of his teaching in this one verse: "Refrain from unwholesome actions, do good, purify the mind. This is the teachings of all the Buddhas."

The last line is interesting because he was saying that this is the same teaching of all the Buddhas in the past and all the Buddhas to come in the future, and so it really points to the timeless nature of the Dhamma.

It's said that what most moved the Buddha after his enlightenment to begin teaching was seeing so many beings who were seeking happiness, wanting happiness, and yet doing the very things in their lives that cause suffering. Of course, we can see this very same pattern over and over again in our own lives. There's a wonderfully pointed teaching by Shantideva, whose great work was a guide to a bodhisattva's way of life, where he said, "We are like senseless children. We shrink from suffering, but love its causes." When I read that, it struck me as being right on. We don't like suffering but we get caught up again and again in the causes of suffering.

So the Buddha, out of really great compassion, took a further step in clarifying the issue—in case we're not sure what actions cause suffering, in case we have confusion about this, even though in many respects it's very obvious. He laid out the actions which cut us off from wisdom, which cut us off from compassion. He laid out the actions that are the cause of suffering for ourselves and other people. It's a very straightforward and powerful teaching.

So what are the unwholesome actions? The Buddha very specifically said these actions cause suffering. There's just such a power in it, very unambiguous. He highlighted ten actions, ten unskillful actions. There are three actions of the body, four actions of speech, and three of the mind.

Now most of these are quite familiar to us, so it's not that for the most part we'll be hearing anything new. But given our propensity to shrink from suffering but love its causes, we need to hear it again and again. It's like planting and watering and nurturing the seeds of this understanding so that this wisdom is activated in moments of intention. When we're about to act, can this wisdom, can this understanding come forth? It helps awaken us from the cycle of our habituated actions.

The first of the unwholesome actions of body is, again, very obvious: not killing, not physically harming other beings or ourselves. We take this on many levels. Not killing people—just think how different the world would be if people just followed that. Sometimes I think it's like the Buddha is teaching kindergarten. Don't kill. Somehow we need to hear it. It's so obvious, and yet we look around the world and people are not understanding this.

Not killing animals for sport or pleasure. Beginning to really respect life. Not killing beings because we don't like the way they look—you know, those little insects and creepy crawlies.

I had a very strong experience of this in my days in India. In the summer months, it would get very hot in Bodh Gaya, which is on the plains. It would go up to 120 degrees, and so anybody who could left for the mountains. I'd gone up with friends and just rented this basic cabin up in the mountains in a hill station called Dalhousie. It had spectacular views of the high peaks, but it was a pretty primitive cabin. There was no running water inside, no plumbing, and lots of big, hairy spiders, which would just hang out on the ceiling of my bedroom.

When I first went into this cottage, it was very disconcerting. But there was really nothing to do. I wasn't going to kill them, and they were a little too big to move outside. So we just learned to coexist. The spiders had their place on the ceiling and I had my place down below. It was amazing—after not a long time, it was totally fine. Just coexisting and respecting each other's life.

And yet that's so different from our culture here. In our culture, something a little unpleasant, something we don't like in the house—take out the can of Raid, kill it. And nobody thinks anything of it. So when we take a look at this first unwholesome action, we really begin to bring it down to more refined levels.

Can we actually connect, not just conceptually but experientially, with the commonality of life, the commonality of the life process? This engenders a very different feeling in us than when we unthinkingly respond with "I don't like it, kill it."

Sometimes we're faced with difficult situations where the solution is not simple. What does one do in trying to eradicate malaria and spraying for the malaria mosquitoes, or other diseases that are insect-borne? Or carpenter ants are eating up your house. What do you do? Do we just say, "Oh, be happy, be happy"? Sometimes we're really faced with choices that are not easy. They're real ethical dilemmas, and we simply try to weigh, in some wise way, the best course of action.

What I feel is important is that even in those cases where for whatever reason it feels necessary to take the life of some beings—if that's the conclusion we come to after some consideration, some wise reflection—can we do it from a place of compassion rather than a place of aversion? Rather than a place of ill will or hatred? Understanding what we're doing and really having compassion for the suffering.

All of these things require a great deal of sensitivity, a great deal of consciousness being brought to them. That's the first of the unwholesome actions: killing. The Buddha said to refrain from it. It causes suffering to ourselves, suffering to others.

The second of the unwholesome actions is stealing. The Buddha said don't steal, don't take what is not given, don't take what is not offered. But we can really expand this and see how it plays out in so many arenas of life—not being dishonest in work situations, for example. Last year I saw a documentary about the whole Enron scandal called *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*. It was unbelievable that these very smart people were so driven by greed that they destroyed the lives of thousands and thousands of people. It was amazing to see the headspace they were in, leading to the actions they took.

We may not be quite on the level of Enron, but just in our own lives, in our own work situations, are there areas that are a little problematic in terms of just being straightforward and honest? We really want to look at this. Are we taking more than we need? This can be extended to exploiting resources. We see that both culturally and individually. It can come down even to smaller, very personal actions when we expand this notion of what stealing means. It doesn't have to be blatant stealing. It can simply be taking what's not necessary rather than giving—that energy of taking rather than offering.

I had the experience of being on retreat here at IMS, going into the lunch line. This particular day they had one of my favorite IMS dishes: sesame spinach. There was a little sign in front: "Moderation please." So I'm going through the line, seeing desire, and the thought in my mind—the first immediate thought—was "How much can I take and still be moderate?" I kind of pushed the limit a bit. Then about thirty seconds or a minute later, I was overcome with guilt. Did I take too much? The people behind me won't have enough! The whole lunch period I was eating lunch, always looking back to see. It was just a small thing, but when we're watching our minds, we see that our sensitivity to wholesome and unwholesome actions can get very refined. That's the beauty of awareness, the beauty of our practice.

So when the Buddha says to refrain from stealing as an unwholesome action, don't think of it just as the obvious and blatant stealing, which we probably don't do. See how it might apply, how that principle might apply in our more ordinary interactions.

Refraining from killing, refraining from stealing. The third of the unwholesome actions that the Buddha said causes suffering to ourselves and suffering to others is sexual misconduct. Now this means different things at different levels. Sexual misconduct for monks or nuns, or people on retreat, means being celibate, refraining from sexual activity. But for lay people in the world, it's not what it means. It really means avoiding sexual activity that causes harm. Traditionally it's talked about in terms of adultery, or

deception, or encouraging other people to break vows of commitment. It could mean inappropriate relations between doctors and patients, or teachers and students, or therapists and clients. There are many arenas where sexual activity is inappropriate.

It's important to really look at and investigate this energy within us, because it is very powerful. It's often when we feel most alive. When sexual passion, sexual energy is strong in us, it's a tremendously energizing, powerful force.

Larry Rosenberg, who is one of the founding teachers at the Cambridge Meditation Center and is now around seventy-five, made a comment at a teacher meeting a little while ago when this issue came up. He simply asked, "Is there anybody who in their life has not made a fool of themselves over sex?" And everybody smiled in acknowledgement of the truth of that. It's powerful. It's a powerful energy. And the Buddha is saying we need to pay attention. We need to become conscious of this.

This is one of my favorite Burmese-English translation moments. Sayadaw U Pandita was speaking about this, going on and on, perhaps speaking for about ten minutes in Burmese. And then the translator said just four words in English. These four words really stuck in my mind: "Lust cracks the brain."

It does. It does. When it's strong, it's so easy for it to be overpowering, and we do all kinds of things. So the Buddha is saying, recognizing this as a powerful energy, learn about it. Really investigate the nature of desire and see what's skillful, see what's unskillful.

Being on retreat, in a surprising way, is an opportunity to learn a great deal about desire—both sexual desire and other kinds of desires—precisely because we're not acting on them. In that space, it gives us a chance, a space of clarity, to really investigate. We can see: What is the nature of it? How is it working in my mind, in my body?

On retreat, as desires arise—and they will arise for different people at different times, sometimes quite strongly—it's a chance to see their impermanent, changing nature. The desire arises, it's there, it's there, it can be there for quite a while, and then it goes. We learn that we don't have to suppress it and we don't need to express it. We learn how to create the space to feel it and still have an understanding, still have the wisdom to see when it's appropriate to act on it and when it is not. We come to a real understanding.

So when sexual desire arises in the mind—and by extension any other kind of desire—how is our mind relating to it? That's the question. Do we indulge the fantasies because they're pleasant? It's very easy to spend a nice hour just indulging in pleasant fantasy. Or for some people, desire arises and there is fear: "I don't want to deal with this." We feel ourselves pulling back with a certain fear of feeling it.

Through our practice, through the cultivation of awareness, we learn the middle way. We're not suppressing it, we're not expressing it—we're just letting it arise, seeing its impermanent nature, letting it pass away.

In the book *Anna Karenina* by Tolstoy, Anna is this beautiful married woman, beautiful in all ways and passionate, having a love affair with a very handsome guardsman, Count Vronsky. Eventually they run off together, and at a certain point the romance begins to pall, especially on his part. This is Vronsky's experience of the nature of desire—really, by extension, Tolstoy's:

"Vronsky, meanwhile, in spite of the complete realization of what he had so long desired, was not perfectly happy. He soon felt that the realization of his desires gave him no more than a grain of sand out of the mountain of happiness he had expected. It showed him the mistake men make in picturing to themselves happiness as the realization of their desires."

I read that and thought: the Buddha could have said that. We make a fundamental mistake. We think that genuine, lasting happiness is going to come through the fulfillment of our desires. And it never does.

This is not something we want to accept on some philosophical basis. It's really to look in our own experience, and that's the beauty of retreat. Desires are going to arise of all kinds. Really look and investigate.

See what it's about. See what that energy is about. See how desires arise, how they pass away. This is a chance to learn about this very powerful force.

So these are the three unwholesome actions of the body: killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. The Buddha says refrain from these. They are the cause of suffering.

There are four unwholesome actions of speech. This in itself is pretty remarkable, and it highlights how powerful a force speech is in our lives. So much suffering comes from our lack of attention to the way we speak. The Buddha singled out right speech as one aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path to liberation. He's saying right speech is important. And yet how often in our practice and our lives do we relegate it to some secondary field of endeavor? We think the real practice of liberation is sitting or walking or being

in silent retreat. Of course, this is obviously an important piece of it all, but the Buddha is saying speech is a very powerful force. It can contribute in a major way either to our suffering or our happiness, so pay attention.

And again, he went further. He laid it all out for us. The beauty of the Buddha's teachings is just how clear they are. He says so straightforwardly what we need to pay attention to. We know from our own experience how speech so often conditions the nature of our relationships. It conditions our own minds. The way we speak reinforces patterns in our minds. It conditions karmic consequences for the future.

So what are the four unwholesome kinds of speech? Again, the first is very obvious: it's lying. The Buddha says don't lie. Don't kill. Don't steal. Take care with sexuality. Don't lie. They're such obvious things, but we do need to hear them and reflect on them.

There are many kinds of false speech, many levels of false speech. There might be slight exaggerations. Or humorous untruths, where we say something untrue just as a way of humor. Or falsehoods whose motivation might be self-protection in some way—we say what's untrue out of a misguided idea that we're protecting something in ourselves or protecting something in others. And sometimes there are very deliberate lies with malicious intent, where the intention is to cause harm, to cause divisiveness.

In any of these situations, from the small little exaggerations to the really big lies, a very interesting question for us to reflect on is: why do we lie? Why would we say that which is untrue? It becomes very interesting to explore the motivations behind false speech. Is it greed for something? Or desire for some kind of self-aggrandizement? Or fear of rejection, or jealousy? There could be so many different motivations where we shade the truth in one way or another.

It's said that in the life of the Bodhisattva, from the time that the previous Buddha, Dipankara, had prophesied that our Buddha would one day become fully awakened—in all those many lifetimes he was called the Bodhisattva, countless lifetimes perfecting the qualities. It's said that he committed many kinds of misdeeds. It's not that he was perfectly pure right from the beginning.

He struggled with a lot of the same forces that we do. But it is said that even though he committed many misdeeds and suffered the karmic consequences of them, the one thing he didn't do from the time of that prediction was this: he never said that which was untrue. It's like planting the flag of truthful speech. I find that very inspiring. And it's also a little surprising to me how something that seems so obviously good, and in one way so obviously simple, should also be so difficult.

I don't think of myself really as being one of the grand liars of these times. But when I watch my speech, it's just striking to me—the little ways untruths can come out. So it's very challenging and powerful just to make truth a standard.

One of my favorite stories about this has become part of IMS lore. It's about the tendency we have to cover for ourselves. Many years ago, there was a yogi on a three-month retreat who had walked into the big walk-in refrigerator and freezer behind the kitchen. It was in the evening, and his hand was in a box of almonds or whatever it was that was in there. A staff person happened to walk in. The staff person was very nice. He saw the yogi and said, "Can I help you?" And I can just picture this scene—hands in the box. "Can I help you?" "Oh, I'm just looking for the maintenance man." The first thing that comes to mind. I think we can all relate to that, that first impulse to self-protection.

So it's just to watch. And of course the great help to us is if we can watch without judgment. There are going to be lots of situations, either very obvious ones or some very subtle ones, but can we pay attention so we do refine our commitment to speaking the truth? It takes practice and it also takes a certain quality of courage to be that honest with ourselves. And that's a gift of the practice.

So falsehood or lying is the first of the unwholesome aspects of speech. The second unwholesome kind of speech the Buddha pointed to is harsh speech, or angry, aggressive speech. It's impactful. Words have a great power to harm, and we see this happen in so many situations in our lives when words that are used actually cause harm to others. We need to really be conscious of the energy of our speech and the motivation behind it.

How do we feel when we have angry, aggressive words coming towards us? What does it feel like to be on the receiving end of that? Very often, in some way we feel hurt, or we get defensive, putting up some kind of protective barrier. It's not a very conducive field for open communication. It doesn't serve the purpose of actually connecting with another being.

The point here is that it's not to stuff or suppress our feelings. If we're feeling angry or upset or whatever is going on in us and something needs to be communicated, it's not that we just suppress it all and pretend, "Oh, I'm not angry," and then have it come out in very passive-aggressive ways. It's to acknowledge the feeling in ourselves but have enough space, enough awareness, enough mindfulness so that we can then communicate that in an effective way rather than simply venting it. We need to be able to modulate the quality of our speech.

One very helpful guideline that I've found to be very powerful in my life, in the practice of this, is to keep in mind whether what I say is creating harmony or creating divisiveness, and letting that be the measure. This plays out a lot in the third kind of unwholesome speech. There's falsehood or lying. There's harsh language. The third kind of unwholesome speech the Buddha talked about is gossip or backbiting—words that cause disharmony between people.

An interesting question, because gossip is so common. This is not a rare thing. This is a major part of how we speak. We often speak about other people. And it's not always malicious, but sometimes it may not be the most wholesome thing. The question that I find very interesting, as I see the impulse in my mind to speak about others, is: what's the delight in it?

Why do we take delight in it? What's happening? What's the motivation in our hearts? Does it reaffirm some sense of self? Do we somehow feel better about ourselves when we're speaking about a third person? Is there some ego gratification? It's worth examining.

I had one very striking experience. Somebody had come to do an interview with me. He was writing a book about different spiritual teachers and scenes in America. He was a very skillful interviewer. He came up, we were sitting in my house, he had his tape recorder going, and we were just talking about different things. Then he started asking me what I thought about many of my colleagues. And I could just feel that impulse to give my two cents about everyone.

It was so interesting. Fortunately, I was mindful enough to see the impulse, to see it. It would have been so much fun—just, "Oh yeah, that person, and that person." But I saw it, fortunately. I could see it in my mind, and I said, "No, this is not skillful. I don't want to go here."

When I saw the book come out, and everything we had talked about was right there in print, I was so grateful for the restraint. I would have been very embarrassed and ashamed if that had actually appeared in the book.

So we want to take care, and we want to see what that impulse is about—to speak about others. And again, to be very clear, even when we do speak about other people, as we often do, what is the motivation? Is it to cause division between others, to cause separation? Or not? Is it in the service of friendship? Is it in the service of harmony? We need to pay attention because these patterns happen very automatically.

The last of the unwholesome patterns of speech—it's not speaking falsely or lying, not harsh speech, not gossip or backbiting—the last one is perhaps the most difficult of all. The Buddha said to refrain from useless talk. There's a great word in Pali—you know, the kind of word where the sound conveys the meaning? The word is *sampapalapa*. And *sampapalapa* is just what it sounds like. It's useless talk. Our words become worthless.

It's really fascinating to watch. Here on retreat, of course, there's not much opportunity for it. But when you're back in the world, just hanging out with friends, talking—so often I'll see something come up in my mind to say that is completely useless. It doesn't serve anything at all. It's just useless. It's some *sampapalapa*.

When I can see it before it comes out the mouth, when I can kind of see it and recognize, "I don't need to say that. This is not necessary"—it always feels so good. I relax back into a place of greater ease. And then when I'm not mindful enough, out it comes.

It's a great practice. Speech is a great practice. A great question to ask with respect to speech is: Is it necessary? Is it necessary to say this or not? As we practice in this way, our hearts and our minds actually become much more peaceful. We're just not giving voice to all this useless chatter. And as I'm sure you've noticed being on retreat, there's plenty of useless chatter going on in the mind already. Our speech conditions that. As we refrain from this kind of speech, our minds and our hearts get more peaceful. So it's a powerful practice.

One thing I want to highlight here: the Buddha listed ten unwholesome actions, saying these actions cause suffering. Four of the ten have to do with speech. I think this is worthy of our attention. This is not just some little side piece of the path—this is a big piece of what causes suffering in our lives and how we can refrain from it.

The last of the unwholesome actions are the three actions of mind. The first of these is covetousness—just the mind that's coveting, that's wanting, wanting what others may have. It's that feeling of just never having enough. Covetousness is like that hungry ghost mentality, always wanting what others may have. It's the opposite of that quality of mudita, sympathetic or empathetic joy, that takes delight in the happiness of others. Rather than coveting what others have, we're actually enjoying their happiness, finding joy and delight in it.

Covetousness always leaves us unfulfilled. And it can lead to so many other unwholesome states—jealousy, envy, and then actions based on that. So we want to really look in our minds, see when this is arising, recognize it, be mindful of it, and then let it go, choosing not to act on it.

There's one little story—it's just one of my favorites, so I must read it. It's about covetousness and how that can lead to other unwholesome mind states. The writer Anne Lamott was describing how difficult it is to deal with the triumphs of other writers, particularly if one of them happens to be a friend. This is her quote: "It can wreak just the tiniest bit of havoc with your self-esteem to find that you are hoping for small bad things to happen to this friend—for, say, her head to blow up."

You know how it is when somebody else gets something that we want or that we're desiring. It's not to judge ourselves. The Buddha is pointing these out because they're common to all of us. These things arise at different times in most of us. So it's not about self-judgment—it's about the interest in seeing, the interest in really becoming aware and recognizing that we can make choices.

The ninth of the unwholesome actions, the second unwholesome action of mind, is ill will. We've talked a lot about this. Ill will means impatience, irritation, anger, annoyance, fear—all kinds of aversion. It arises when we don't get what we want. We want something, we don't get it, so aversion arises. Or we do get what we don't want—like pain or discomfort or unpleasant mind states. Something arises and we don't want it, and that causes aversion. It could be difficult situations; aversion arises in difficult circumstances in the world or with other people.

So often there is a tendency to blame others for how we feel. We feel aversion and it's somebody else's fault. Years ago I was in a relationship with a woman who I'm still very good friends with. One of the highlights of our relationship was when we were having a little disagreement, bordering on an argument. At one point she turns to me and says, "Stop making me feel aversion." I must say, I just started to laugh—which probably didn't help. But it was such a classic expression of something we all feel: "Stop making me feel this way."

Well, nobody makes us feel any way. How we feel is completely up to us, even in very difficult circumstances. How we feel about it is up to us. And this is a tremendously liberating insight.

Just as an example of this, and this ties into speech: the Buddha also talked about listening, how to listen. This is what he said, because there are five courses of speech that others may use when they address you. People may speak to us in five different ways.

Their speech may be timely or untimely, true or untrue, gentle or harsh, connected with good or connected with harm, spoken with a mind of loving-kindness or with a mind of inner hate. "Here, bhikkhus, you should train yourself thus: Our minds will remain unaffected. We shall utter no unskillful words. We shall abide compassionate for their welfare with a mind of loving-kindness."

That's a pretty high bar. Somebody speaking to us with a mind filled with hate, with an intention to harm, untimely, untruthfully—and you should train yourself thus: our minds will remain unaffected, we shall utter no unskillful words, we shall abide compassionate for their welfare. There's a tremendous lesson here—that how we feel, how we respond, how we relate is up to us. It's not dependent on the external condition. And that's the great power of the practice. That's what we're learning.

So there's covetousness, there's ill will—these are the unwholesome actions of mind. The last of them, the last unwholesome action of mind, is called wrong view. And wrong view has different aspects. One aspect of wrong view is not understanding, not considering the law of karma—understanding that our actions have consequences. Wrong view is the belief that there is no result from skillful or unskillful actions.

The Buddha is saying something very direct here about how we need to understand the world. He's saying it is wrong view, it is misperception, if we think there is no result from skillful or unskillful actions. When this wrong view is present, when we don't understand action and its result, it's like trying to navigate through the world, to navigate through our lives, without understanding what brings happiness and what causes suffering. We go down so many wrong streets, wrong directions, so many missteps because we don't understand, because we have wrong views. When wrong view is present in the mind, we don't stop to consider the results of our actions. We don't consider where the actions are leading and whether or not we want to go there. So wrong view is a very powerful and potentially dangerous force in the mind. It obscures clear seeing and it's the cause of a lot of suffering.

The other aspect of wrong view—one is not seeing or understanding that skillful and unskillful actions bear fruit. The other crucial aspect of wrong view, and one that is at the root cause of so much suffering, is the deeply conditioned view or concept of self. We have and will continue to talk a lot about this—the idea, the belief, the view that there is someone behind experience to whom it's all happening.

We create this mental construct of a self, an "I." We call it, name it Joseph, or Mioshen, or Annie, or whoever—each one of us. And then we reinforce this view of self every time we identify with arising experience. We identify with a thought, we identify with an emotion—my thought, my feeling, I'm sad, I'm happy, my pain. But the "I" and "mine" is extra. We're adding that to the bare fact of the experience.

In our practice, we begin to get pretty clear glimpses—and by now probably you've all had some taste of this. Yes, the sensations are just coming and going. The thoughts are just coming and going. The emotions are just coming and going. We begin to get a sense, even just a little bit, of this selfless nature. It's just empty phenomena rolling on.

But the last hideout of self, and the one that's quite difficult to see, is the identification we have with the knowing, with the awareness. We can see all the changing objects coming and going and get some sense of them being not-self. But through that identification with awareness, we create the sense of a witness or an observer. "Well, that's who I am." So that's kind of the last holdout of this view of self.

If you remember from last week's talk, we talked about the difference between consciousness, awareness, and wisdom. In that context, awareness and mindfulness were used synonymously. So this goes to the question that came up this morning. In this context, awareness or mindfulness and consciousness—all of them are conditioned states arising and passing away, not I, not self. And the Buddha is very clear in his description of how consciousness is dependently arising. It arises dependent on conditions, and we will talk more about that.

So in this context, awareness or mindfulness is a conditioned state of mind, just like everything else—just like concentration or wisdom or generosity or love or fear or anger. They're all conditioned states. There are some schools of Buddhism, though, and some schools even within Theravada, that speak of an unconditioned awareness, which is something apart from consciousness and the aggregates.

And this question—is awareness conditioned or unconditioned—has been hotly debated for thousands of years. So I would suggest that you not spend too much time on this question. Rather than draw conclusions, rather than spin out in your thoughts—is it conditioned? Is it unconditioned? What did the Buddha mean?—as a way of not getting caught in all that, and of staying aligned with fundamental right view, the view of selflessness, if we simply practice not clinging to anything, whatever arises, not to cling—not to cling to the different objects, not to cling to knowing, not to cling to awareness—the mind of not clinging...

There's a Tibetan teaching that says, "If you do not cling, whatever arises is naturally freed." And this is a beautiful image. If we don't cling, whatever arises is naturally freed. We can stay right in that experience of freedom in the moment. And we don't need to get caught up in the philosophic debates anymore.

At one point in my practice in Bodh Gaya, I'd been there for a while and I just had dropped into this wonderful place. It was like a non-dual awareness, and I was doing walking meditation and it just became so effortless and free. There was no separation of awareness and body. I started kind of dancing around the roof of the Burmese Vihara where I was staying, and couldn't wait to tell my teacher. So I go running to Munindraji and I was telling him how free I was. And all he said to me was, "Don't recondition your mind." It was a great teaching. Don't recondition your mind with another conclusion. Just be in the experience and let the Dharma unfold. So I just pass that on to you in terms of drawing conclusions. Stay in the openness. Stay in the not knowing.

So these are the ten unwholesome actions and what we should refrain from: killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, harsh speech, gossip, useless speech, covetousness, ill will, and wrong view. It was really out of great compassion that the Buddha pointed these out to us. It's like putting a sign on a beach that says, "Danger, Strong Undertow"—a warning sign that tells us to be careful. That's what the Buddha is doing here. He's putting up the sign: Be careful. These are the actions that lead to suffering.

So we need to internalize it, to investigate it. It's not simply a question of believing it. Really look at all of these things. Internalize it and reflect on it in an appropriate way.

In this clear and very straightforward teaching, the Buddha helps us understand freedom with a very mature and long-ranging vision. Freedom is not about doing what we want when we want. That's really addiction. Freedom is in that place of wisdom where we can make choices, where we can choose wisely, understanding what is the cause of suffering and what is not.

I'd like to close with a few verses from the Dhammapada about happiness. The Buddha is telling us, what causes happiness for us? He said: Happiness is having friends when need arises. Happiness is contentment with whatever there is. Happiness is merit at the end of one's life. Happiness is the abandoning of all sufferings. In the world, respect for one's mother is happiness, as is respect for one's father. In the world, respect for renunciants is happiness. Happiness is virtue lasting through old age. Happiness is steadfast faith. Happiness is the attainment of wisdom. Not doing the unskillful is happiness.

Let's sit for a couple of minutes. There's one Tibetan aspiration: May you be free of suffering and the causes of suffering. May you have happiness and the causes of happiness.

CHAPTER 15

Brahmavihāra - Guided Mettā Sitting

Patricia Genoud-Feldman · 47 min

> *In this gentle guided meditation, Patricia Genoud-Feldman leads practitioners through the traditional progression of mettā (loving-kindness) practice, one of the four brahmavihāras or divine abodes. She emphasizes that mettā is fundamentally about opening and accepting—being all-inclusive of whatever mind states arise while holding qualities of kindness and gentleness.*
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> *The session works with three categories of beings: oneself as the foundation, a benefactor (someone easy to connect with, perhaps a teacher or respected elder toward whom gratitude naturally arises), and a dear friend (someone with whom we have an uncomplicated, caring relationship). Patricia offers flexibility in approach—practitioners may work with phrases, visualization, or simply the felt sense of connection—honoring that different methods serve different people at different times.*
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> *Throughout the practice, Patricia emphasizes staying where connection comes easily rather than forcing difficult relationships. She reminds practitioners that mettā involves "planting seeds" without expectation of immediate results. The meditation concludes by extending loving-kindness outward to all beings in the meditation hall, the staff, animals on the land, and ultimately all living beings and the earth itself. Patricia closes with practical guidance on integrating mettā into daily practice, whether as dedicated sits or as a settling practice before vipassanā meditation.*

So this is once again a metta sit, and Rebecca last week set the stage for us. I think she really expressed the meaning of metta, and this expression we will call forth tonight once again—the expression of sharing friendliness, goodness towards ourself, towards other beings in a very caring way.

Simplifying as much as possible what this means for us: to actually connect with our inner goodness, the level of the heart, whatever that is present, inclusive of all mind states, because metta is just that—opening and accepting, being all-inclusive of what is, holding that quality of kindness, gentleness.

Beginning by sending and receiving kindness with ourself, that's usually the ground from which we then move forth to invite what is called a benefactor. A benefactor is a person who is easy to connect with. It's said that it's a loved being, one that may be a respected elder, a teacher, someone with whom there's a sense perhaps of gratitude.

We've been helped by this person. In this part of the world we can also connect with a child or someone with whom there's a real easy connection, where spontaneously that feeling of love comes forth.

So you've been inviting those two categories of beings—yourself and benefactor—last week, and we'll do so tonight just as a way of connecting and nourishing the metta feeling. And if your intention is to stay with yourself or just with the benefactor, that's absolutely fine. It's really important to respect that possibility, just holding that intention in the heart and really going on the easy path rather than making it difficult for ourself.

Tonight will include another easy category. We're still working on the level of easy beings, and that's the next category, which is called the dear friend. So here again, quite spontaneously, when we think of a friend—or maybe we have many friends—there's this sense of kindness that comes forth pretty easily. And so once again, the dear friend is a person towards whom we may have an uncomplicated relationship. And it's really important that that is so, because we can have friends and then we can easily switch to seeing the negative side, just like it is with ourself. So here again, we really try to stay connected to the good qualities of this person. And it may be that there's more than one person coming up in the field of metta, of kindness. And so to allow that to be—if there are various beings that come forth, to invite them. Friendly beings, beings that we care for, that are dear to us.

So these are the three categories of beings that we'll invite tonight and with whom we'll share kindness, friendliness, gentleness of heart.

I'd just like to remind you before we begin that the kindness can be offered in a wordless way, meaning that we can stay with the felt sense if that is of support to you. Or we can hold an image of ourself or the other person and connect in that way. Or it may be that we are helped with the phrases. So there will be moments when I will offer these phrases just a few times. You may have your own by now. Just as a way that you might want to be reminded of the phrases once or twice, and then you'll be noticing and experiencing for yourself what is most helpful. At different times I have found different ways. It's perfectly fine to explore and notice the impact of the metta on your own heart and mind.

So sitting very comfortably, as comfortably as you can. Ease of body is really essential here. If you have body pain, really offer yourself the space of metta towards your body, and you might want to move to a chair. And releasing those places that might hold tension in the body. Relaxing the body.

And very gently directing the attention to the space of the heart. You might want to even put a hand on your heart to feel connected. And in a very open and relaxed way, best you can, wishing yourself well, holding that intention to wish yourself kindness, gentleness of heart. Knowing that we totally deserve this gentleness of heart. And it's relating to our innate goodness.

Offering ourself metta, loving friendliness, holding that intention, bringing ease in the breath, in the heart, in the belly. Infusing kindness in the entire body. Inviting words of kindness if we wish, or simply staying with the felt sense.

May I be safe and protected. May I be happy and peaceful. May I be healthy and strong. May I take care of myself easily and joyfully while living on this earth.

Sending and receiving words of kindness, of metta.

Holding the intention to plant seeds of kindness. Just planting the seeds. Not worrying about the results. No expectations.

May I be safe. May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I take care of myself easily.

When the mind wanders, have the kindness to notice that and gently bring it back. Beginning again, connecting with the heart. Whatever is present—perhaps other feelings arising—including them all. Holding kindness for ourselves and receiving this kindness.

If we wish now, we may stay with ourselves. Or we can invite the benefactor and offer metta to this person. You might hold an image or just the felt sense of their presence, extending loving care to them. You might express metta through words:

May you be safe and protected. May you be happy and peaceful. May you be healthy and strong. May you take care of yourself easily and joyfully while living on this earth.

Now, if we wish—truly noticing if there's space to invite a new being—noticing for yourself if inviting a dear friend is what feels good to your heart. If so, bringing the image of this person or the felt sense, just knowing the presence of this being near us.

Perhaps having a few moments of reflection on why we choose this particular person. Maybe seeing their good qualities, what makes them special. And very naturally, spontaneously, the heart opens and wishes them well. Wishes this person to be safe. Wishes this person to be happy. Healthy.

Notice the feeling of connection. Sending metta and receiving their goodness. At your own pace, with words or without words, truly caring for this connection, wishing this person well. Without forcing any feeling, the simple wish: *May you be well and happy.*

And now, if you were in someone else's company, saying goodbye, allowing that person to leave. Connecting with that heart space once again. Noticing, allowing whatever is present to be received in kindness. Holding ourselves with gentleness.

We'll end this evening's metta sit by allowing ourselves to appreciate each other's presence, each other's support. Holding a sense of the space in the room with everybody present, and wishing—including yourself—everyone to be safe and protected. Happy and peaceful. Healthy and strong. Wishing everyone to take care of themselves with ease.

If we wish, we can extend feelings and words of kindness outwardly, expressing kindness towards all the staff, the people who take care of us in such a caring and loving way, supporting our practice. And all the beings that live on this land—the birds and the chipmunks and the frogs, the flies and the butterflies, the turkeys and the deer. All living beings, seen and unseen, may we wish them well.

May you be happy.

Extending loving kindness in all directions to all living beings. May all living beings be safe and protected. May all living beings be happy and peaceful. May all living beings take care of themselves easily and joyfully while living on this earth.

Sending metta to this planet, Earth. May all the elements live in harmony with one another. And may all beings care for this Earth.

Just remembering that it's not because we are doing metta once a week during one sit that you can't invite yourself at other times to benefit and nourish and support your practice with this loving kindness. You can either choose to do a sit every day dedicated to metta practice—maybe the morning or the evening sit—or you may wish to begin some vipassana sits with ten minutes of metta, just to settle in and relax in the heart. This is especially helpful if we're having a hard time to just settle in. And then you leave it on the side and, as Rebecca said, not mingle the two practices together—knowing when we're doing metta practice and knowing when we're doing vipassana practice.

It's also helpful to know that if we have had ease with one of these categories—it may be yourself, or maybe it's not at all yourself; sometimes self is the difficult category—but a dear friend or benefactor, then you'd like to really nourish that connection. It's really beneficial to stay where it's easy, because even if you choose that one, it will naturally flourish and expand to other situations.

So having said that, enjoy your evening practice.

CHAPTER 16

Seven Factors of Awakening - Part 1

Patricia Genoud-Feldman · 58 min

In this profound teaching, Patricia Genoud-Feldman introduces the seven factors of awakening (bojjhaṅga), focusing on mindfulness (sati) and the three energizing factors: investigation (dhammavicaya), energy (vīriya), and rapture (pīti). She explains how these wholesome mental qualities, already present within us, become revealed through persistent practice of the four foundations of mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna). Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), she illuminates how the Buddha taught that these factors naturally ripen when we abide contemplating body, feelings, mind, and mind objects with ardent, clear awareness.

The talk emphasizes that mindfulness serves as both a standalone factor and the cause for the other six to arise, acting like a mirror that reflects experience without interpretation or commentary. Patricia shares personal stories from her practice with Sayadaw U Paṇḍita in Burma, offering the insight that "we cannot understand what we don't connect with" – highlighting the importance of simple, direct connection with each moment. She explores how investigation reveals the three characteristics of existence: impermanence (anicca), unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), and non-self (anattā).

Practical guidance is woven throughout, including how to work with boredom as a gateway to deeper practice, the secret that "energy comes from energy" through sustained effort, and how to balance the energizing factors to avoid restlessness. The teaching encourages practitioners to explore their edges while maintaining patience, allowing practice to blossom naturally like a flower given proper nourishment. Patricia closes with T.S. Eliot's words about arriving where we started and knowing the place for the first time.

Our practice is a dynamic living process. You might have noticed that out of this process, new ways of seeing and understanding emerge quite spontaneously. As this practice unfolds for us, we discover through clear observation a possibility of opening to and accepting new dimensions. These dimensions have to do with the way things are, rather than believing our thoughts and believing in the little stories we have going on.

Very clearly, we gradually become more comfortable in just being here, rather than endlessly trying to be someone else. We allow ourselves to be who we are. There's less of a wanting for something else. We meet the qualities of the heart and mind that represent the core, the essence of what this teaching is about, of what the Buddha talks about in various ways.

Tonight I have the pleasure to talk about some of the factors of the mind that lead to full awakening—factors of mind or heart that support the practice in a wholesome way. You can say they are our allies on the path. These factors are already present in us; nothing comes from outside. When we practice, and especially in an intensive retreat like this one, they begin to reveal themselves as we pay closer attention. We can notice how these qualities operate in our minds, how they can be cultivated as we move through life, as we are nurturing the practice here. This offers the possibility of integrating all the understanding, and that's the purpose: to live our life with more wisdom, more understanding, more openness of heart.

These positive spiritual qualities or wholesome states of mind are always present in one who is awakened. They are also qualities that, if we pay attention, we can cultivate and nourish, and they will fulfill our spiritual life.

So what are they? What are the qualities called the factors of awakening? You've probably heard the word enlightenment—factors of awakening or enlightenment. I like to use the word awakening because it really is about what the Buddha realized. He was an awakened being.

You might guess that mindfulness is part of the list. Mindfulness, of course, is present. Then there are three arousing factors, or we can say energizing factors: investigation or inquiry, energy—which includes perseverance, courage of heart, strength of heart—and joyful interest or rapture. Then there are three calming factors or stabilizing factors: tranquility or calm, steadiness of mind or concentration, and equanimity.

These three arousing factors and three calming factors need to be in balance. Tonight I'd like to talk about mindfulness and the three arousing factors.

These mental qualities are present or absent in our meditation; they're not always accessible. What veils them? Very often there's the veil of greed, hatred, or delusion, or we can also say the veil of the hindrances. It's just a veil, and it's precisely these nurturing qualities—these factors of awakening—that enable one to see the hindrances for what they are, to see greed, hatred, and delusion for what they are. With these qualities of mind, we can meet the difficulties, the unwholesome states of mind, which progressively become less and less able to prevent us from seeing the truth.

None of these mental qualities are personal in any way, and that's what we see through the process. They don't belong to me. They don't belong to you. They're present due to certain causes and conditions.

What are they based on? The whole teaching is based on the Satipaṭṭhāna, the path of practice founded on the four foundations of mindfulness that we have offered, that you've been practicing. Nothing is secret here.

The first foundation is mindfulness of the body: body, breath, sensations, movements—everything that's tangible as you're going through your day. Then there's mindfulness of feeling tone: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Third is mindfulness of mind—everything that is happening in the mind: thoughts, images, mental images, mind states, consciousness, the knowing. Finally, there's mindfulness of dhamma, the fourth foundation. Here, dhamma means phenomena—the nature of all phenomena. This also includes all the teachings: the Four Noble Truths, the Five Hindrances, many others, and among them the seven factors of awakening. We can be mindful of these specific qualities, being mindful of mindfulness itself, of the energy, the investigation, the calm.

The Buddha said, "Oh bhikkhus, if the four foundations of mindfulness are practiced persistently and repeatedly, the seven factors of awakening will be automatically and fully developed." That is why mindfulness, the factor of mindfulness, is so valuable and important.

And the Buddha is expounding how these seven factors ripen. This is from the Satipatthana Sutta:

Bhikkhus—which here you are, bhikkhus, yogis, you can say—on whatever occasion a yogi or a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as body, feelings as feelings, mind as mind, mind objects as mind objects, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world, on that occasion unremitting mindfulness is established in him. Abiding thus mindful, he investigates and examines that state with wisdom and embarks upon a full inquiry into it. In one who investigates and examines that state with wisdom and embarks upon a full inquiry into it, tireless energy is aroused. In one who has aroused energy, unworldly joy, rapture arises. In one who is rapturous, the body and mind become tranquil. In one whose body is tranquil and who feels gladness, the mind becomes unified. He closely looks on with equanimity at the mind. This is how the four foundations of mindfulness, developed and matured, fulfill the seven factors of awakening.

So this is the process, the path that we are on.

It's also lovely to know that in the suttas, the seven factors of awakening are often offered by the Buddha himself, or even by senior monks like Sariputra, to monks who are ill—meaning that very often in the suttas you would have an ill monk, and this is

the teaching that will cure the mind from the disease of the heart. So it's said in the suttas, so often, that when one hears these seven factors of awakening, the monk, the person who hears these teachings, simply cures. It's the end of the illness.

It's also said that the devas, the celestial beings, often visit the places where this particular teaching is taught, is offered. And why is that? It's said that the devas rejoice in knowing that humans—and it's rare—can have the precious opportunity to hear about these beautiful qualities of mind, and that one through these qualities can reach full awakening, full enlightenment. So you might want to look for the devas tonight. There's a real sense of rejoicing.

And I know for myself, when I received these teachings in Burma from Sayadaw U Pandita, usually he would take a month to give teachings on these particular qualities. It would really give a sense of uplifting of the mind because of the possibility of awakening.

So these seven factors of awakening, as you might have noticed, are offered in a particular order. And yet they're not completely separate one from another. It's easy to link them, one nurturing the other. It's possible that one is highlighted. And yet it's the balance of these qualities that is most helpful for us, so that we can reach Nibbana.

We begin with mindfulness.

You might think that you've heard enough about mindfulness. And yet it's important to realize that we can never hear enough about mindfulness, because it's truly difficult to realize its importance on this path to awakening. Here it has the role of standing on its own. It's the balancing factor. It's the cause for the other six to arise. So it has quite an important role. It's truly a favorite in the Buddha's lists, and for good reason: this is what led him to see the truth.

Just a few reminders about mindfulness. The first is that mindfulness is seeing clearly what is present, and it's a momentary experience which acts just like a mirror. It reflects only what is present—nothing less, nothing more. There's that sense of no interpretations, no comment, no reactivity, not even commentary about what is present. So it's quite a special factor of mind.

Often we may think, "Oh yes, I'm mindful." And if there is that little sense of commentary which is lingering, well, there's probably not a totally pure mindfulness that just reflects what is.

What allows us to know is the knowing quality. It's knowing the sound when we hear a sound. So there's, of course, the sound, and there's the experience. Hearing is happening, but we don't need to think about what is happening when we hear a sound. It's to pay careful attention—that careful attention meaning a closeness of attention which reveals the knowing as well. And there's the experience of hearing.

So we cultivate that attention with an attitude of persistence. And what happens if we do so? Mindfulness just heightens the level of mindfulness. It is the factor that we need to care about, and it supports itself. If there's a sense of worry when you hear these words, you can drop the worry and just remember that it's about carrying the practice, supporting mindfulness. If there's support towards mindfulness, mindfulness heightens the level of mindfulness itself.

You don't need to ask yourself anything more when there's this quality of knowing, because then it could raise the level of the thinking mind rather than just being with what is. The secret here is that we need to do it from the moment we are getting out of bed to the moment that we're going to bed. And if possible—I know that I had a teacher saying—see if you can be mindful during your dreams. Are you mindful when you're dreaming? Can you remember? Are you aware?

And it happens that there are periods when the practice is carried with the factors of awakening, where yes, that quality of mindfulness was carried over into the sleeping time. And it's not an aim. Please don't make that an aim, because it really is not helpful. Yet it's every moment, in small ways—the action of taking the soap when we wash our hands, turning a knob, just one step, sitting on the toilet. You know, it's not less glorious to sit on the toilet than sitting in the Dharma Hall. And if we have that quality of mindfulness when we are in that moment, that's exactly the level of awareness through which we can sense how precious our practice can be.

Over time, there's an act of greater acceptance, of interest, which leads to non-identification. Less grasping, less attachment. The quality of mindfulness is seeing clearly what can happen when it's happening. And so what is the outcome of this? It's greater understanding, greater wisdom. And that is a momentary wisdom. It's not that we need to be mindful one moment and then we forget for an hour and come back. What happens is that it raises the commitment to waking up every moment. And therefore we do the best we can. It's out of this natural sense of beingness.

At the beginning of our practice, if we are not acquainted with the practice, it seems like it's a lot of doing. But after a while, there is a sense of resting in awareness, of resting in the present moment, just because the mind does appreciate. And you might have seen that at moments where you're really connected with what is happening—

there's a greater peace in just being present and not so much the need for the mind to look for this or that, looking for distractions. We're kind of resetting the format of the mindset. And we're cutting the ties of the habitual tendencies. So to see for ourselves if there is that quality of interest, which is exactly what grows out of mindfulness—interest.

There's a story from my practice with Sayadaw U Pandita. One day he was trying to make me practice very diligently, and the question he asked was one that, if I asked you, it would be interesting so that you can hear the level of mindfulness that was asked of me. He asked me if I was missing any mind moments during the day. And in the snap of a finger, it is said something like 70,000 mind moments arise. So you can just notice how demanding that was.

My response to him was, "I hope not." And this response didn't satisfy him at all. He said, "Out." That was the end of my interview. And I didn't feel very good at the end of that interview with this Sayadaw.

The next day I had an interview with another Sayadaw, who immediately reported the event and said that I had not quite given the answer that was expected. And so I had the wisdom to ask, "What was the question?" And he said, "The question was, are you missing any mind moments?" And the fact that I had replied, "I hope not," was very arrogant, was full of pride, because of course we're missing mind moments.

Instead of "any mind moments," I had heard through translation "many mind moments," and it changed everything. And so that Sayadaw said, "Sayadaw U Pandita feels you gave an answer that only an arahant, only a fully enlightened being, can give." Which of course didn't please Sayadaw U Pandita.

And it was a great lesson in humility. It really brought such a commitment to the practice. It raised the level of commitment—not to struggle or strive, but to care, to connect every single moment for greater understanding, not for any result, but just to fully give myself to the practice.

What Sayadaw was trying to say, or what I heard later on, brought a very valuable insight, an insight that has stayed with me during all these years. And that insight I'd like to share with you: we cannot understand what we don't connect with. We see the truth, or just what is happening in each moment, only when we relate in the most simple manner. And that is the quality that enables one to see the truth—the simplicity. It's establishing that very direct connection of a simple path, a simple step, one breath at a time, one sensation, one thought, in this very moment. This is what reveals the truth. And so often it means cutting through that layer of interpretation. That's extra.

This leads us to the second factor of awakening, which is investigation or inquiry. These two are totally linked—that's the wisdom aspect. It's mindfulness with wisdom that emerges as we're being mindful in the way that I just expressed. It gives us a penetrative way to see through the concepts, to see through our ideas. And then we can refine so many subtleties.

That level of interest or inquiry has one quality to it, and the quality is that we don't think we already know what we're seeing. In the preciousness of the practice, because of the time that we have here—and it's long days at times—there can be a sense that we've already seen whatever it is that is presenting to us so many times, ten thousand, ten million times, and so we're not truly interested. And the investigation suffers from that idea, that lack of freshness, lack of curiosity.

So, to remind ourselves that we are explorers and that every moment counts. If there's that freshness in the mind, it will raise the willingness to look more closely. Just like tonight—I live at the Forest Refuge, and I was coming through the forest. It was already pretty dark, and suddenly the flashlight went out. No more batteries. And I was in the middle of that forest, and I thought, "Whoa, that's interesting." The mental factor—because probably, you know, I had been working on the talk—was there. It wasn't fear, it wasn't anger or whatever, or it could have been any mental factor, but it was just like the mental factor of interest was present. And it was, "Oh, this is interesting." That's the first thing that came to my mind. And then I thought, "Oh, Marion's going to be behind me. I'll be okay. She'll have a flashlight."

But to be okay with the unknown, to settle in that presence of inquiry, investigating how it feels, and to bring to mind if there is this sense of boredom or laziness or lack of interest—to bring this phrase: "Do I know this? Can I be here?" That's why the Zen tradition speaks of beginner's mind. If we had nothing that we knew about sitting, can you imagine if you were here and you'd be experiencing your very first sit? That quality of mind would be one of interest. It doesn't mean that there would be no pain, but at least that motivation would be here.

So what is the quality of intention here? What it brings towards mindfulness and wisdom, which is also called wise attention, is to not only see through the concepts, but we meet the three characteristics of existence that we've been talking about. The quality of investigation shows us, in the light of illuminating what's in the dark, we move from ignorance to wisdom through lowering the feeling of confusion, of ignorance, and highlighting the reality. And the reality is that everything is impermanent. We see this very directly.

I was practicing in Burma, and the days there are quite long. There's three to four hours of sleep a night. You begin practice around three in the morning—wake up at three, and practice starts there. And then ten at night is the end, so it might be ten, ten thirty, eleven. So there is a lot of dedication to sitting and walking. In a walking period, I noticed that as I was clearly feeling the sensations and trying to be very aware of bodily sensations, there was a sense of not truly connecting. What I had not seen is the quality of the mind with which I was being with the sensations. And that's what we have been talking about, which is attitude.

What is the attitude of the mind? The sensations were known, and yet there was a sense of lack of connection, of not truly meeting the experience of sensation. When I highlighted that moment and asked, "What's the attitude?" I discovered that the mind was colored with boredom.

To see that boredom, I moved away from bodily sensations and noticed what was happening in the mind. As soon as I highlighted the boredom—as awareness was showing boredom—boredom got interesting. That was totally amazing in that reality of that moment. It suddenly shifted, changing the whole experience. So it's not about what the experience is; it's the quality of the mind.

Then I came back, connecting with boredom. And that went away; I was again aware of the bodily sensations. Because the openness of the mind was strong, there was another layer that came up, and the thought was, "Oh, I hate being bored." This "I hate being bored" was clearly a manifestation of aversion in the mind. To highlight that: What is the quality of the mind then? What does aversion feel like in that moment? See how momentary this is? Really, uniquely, very close to the experience. How does aversion feel? Immediately as I noticed aversion in the mind, there was tightness in the legs. And that revealed another exploration. The practice, the process, was alive.

In each moment that we're truly connecting, there's a uniqueness not only to the practice but to our whole life. We're fully awake, seeing the birth and death of each experience arising and passing away—that sense of impermanence truly revealing that there's nothing we can hold on to. And yet, can we go with the flow of the river? If it's not one experience, there's another one that will appear, that will come. This raises that level of investigation.

What it reveals, too, out of that sense of impermanence is seeing that because it's changing all the time, there's nothing that is truly satisfying. No experience, even if it's wonderfully pleasant, stays. So there's nothing we can say, "Okay, I can hold on to this, clinging." Then another experience is going to change.

This process reveals that it's not personal. And that's the third of the characteristics. It's not my pain. It's not my aversion. It's not my boredom. It's the nature of Dhamma to reveal itself—mental and physical phenomena, and the play of that life process. One moment physical will reveal the mental quality; one moment mental quality will reveal the physical. It's the play of this mind and body process that allows us to see the nature of experience, the nature of awareness, the nature of knowing. And it's that which frees the mind from grasping, from holding on when it's pleasant, from pushing away when it's not pleasant.

This is a very enlivening process. When we are connected—and I'm sure you've had moments when we are connected—we do feel that it's flowing. There's not much resistance, not much wanting or pushing away. It inspires us to continue. When we don't have those moments of connection and we lack inspiration, we can remind ourselves of the Buddha's determination. I often call forth as a refuge his great determination to see the truth. Can you imagine that he did this alone? It's incredible. He had teachers to a certain extent, but the process of revealing the letting go of clinging—he had to find it himself.

I don't see any other quality than his total determination, courage of heart, and persistence of effort to see the truth. So one can take refuge in the Buddha if one feels inclined to, when those moments arise where there is a lack of interest, where boredom kicks in.

The energy or perseverance that I talked about is the second factor of awakening, the second energizing factor—the courageous strength of heart. And it's when things are difficult that we need to have more of this courage of heart, this energy. The Dalai Lama consistently reminds us that the places that hurt us more are where we need to look, because they are the places where we can find freedom. They're the most interesting, he says. And it's this tireless energy, born out of non-reaction, that allows us to accept more and more, to open more and more to those difficult places.

Dipa Ma—I think Friday night Rebecca mentioned her name—was an extraordinary teacher and yogi. And she says, "Nothing can prevent you from seeing the truth. Absolutely nothing. Everything is worthy of our attention because everything leads to liberation. Absolutely everything." That's totally encouraging. In this light, she was saying: truly trust. You can do anything you want to do. It's out of that sense of great courage that one can practice.

You'll all agree that energy comes and goes. We don't have a constant state of low energy or high energy, and there's not much we can do about the level of energy itself. Yet we can stay steady in the effort to practice, whatever level of energy is present. And

that means: keep going. Whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, whether we feel like it or don't feel like it, we just keep going. And it's not about getting anything—it's about truly revealing the momentary truth.

It's so easy to practice when it's pleasant. And what a good yogi I am when everything goes right! I'm the best here, and I'll do maybe two or three hours of sitting without moving, don't even think about the next walking, and I'm in here. And yet how easy it is that in a single moment there's a shift of energy and everything suddenly changes and we want out. It's so rapid, that change. Have you noticed in your own practice how quickly it can shift? And yet there can be that possibility of continuity.

I've seen for myself in my own practice how much I was placing worth on how things were going—how I was good when everything was fine, and how I felt worthless when everything was not fine—until I realized: this is totally ridiculous. It has nothing to do with me. It's causes and conditions that make it this way.

And yet we can support the mental factor of effort or energy. Now there's a key understanding here, really a secret: energy comes from energy. It comes from doing, meaning staying on the path. The very doing, the keeping on going, creates that energy that we're so desperately looking for. So many times that surrender of giving up is not helpful, because less energy gives less and less. Motivation really reduces the amount of energy, and that is mental.

I've seen for myself that in late night sits—or not even late night, just after the Dharma talk—so often I don't have so much energy in the evening when I practice long. And how easy it was for me to say, "Dharma talk, and then I'll practice in my room. Or I'll make up for that hour tomorrow morning—I'll get up earlier." And of course, the next morning I wouldn't get up earlier because there was less energy, which means that there were maybe two hours of practice that I would be losing.

After a few days of this, I could notice that there was less and less interest during those evening hours. And yet, thank goodness, suddenly something rose up saying, "Okay, tonight I'm just going to be determined. I vow to stay in the hall until the end of the schedule." And I did that for the same number of days that I had given in. It was amazing, because after a few nights the energy level was raised, and I could stay awake after the last bell rang in the hall. I couldn't believe it.

There was, of course, a moment of not really wanting. But then in that sitting, the energy level started raising—which I didn't even think of giving a chance at first.

So giving ourselves a chance to do that bit of extra. And it might be that this is your thing, or it may not be. Maybe it's getting up earlier. Sometimes we're too lax. Sometimes it's not enough effort, and sometimes we strive too much.

So this is an important point in this time of the retreat—to explore our limits and to notice how we can help ourselves in the best way possible while we're here. Like Pascal said last night, he was talking about working at the edge. And what are edges? It's a moment in this time of the retreat where we can refine our practice. And if needed, speak to a teacher about this—the quality of effort or energy that is available, or where it is that you might help yourself towards finding a balance.

It's not about pushing or forcing. We've emphasized a lot of relaxation, but we do need to nourish that continuity of mindfulness every moment.

In the context of effort, Ajahn Amaro says that it's always different. We always need to ask ourselves the question: What is the quality of energy? What is the effort needed here? One moment it will be that we need to relax because we're tense. And often physically you can feel the tension. Therefore you need to relax and settle back. Enjoy the ride because the momentum is strong. Another moment it is that we apply mindfulness and it gives just a little sense of raised energy. And then we don't need to put extra effort because it would push us into the next moment. And so then we need to rest.

See how subtle this is. Awareness does that job. Mindfulness does the job. Yet we need to connect rather than space out. It's truly giving the necessary ingredients to the flower for it to blossom. And it's blossoming in its own time. We don't need to rush. We can't force the flower to open. We would never think of forcing a flower to open.

Allowing that blossoming, that blooming of the flower in its own time, watching its nature—this is so valuable. And that is the quality of patience. So we just keep at it. Every little moment of water, of sun, of good soil just allows for that plant to flourish. And it's the same with us. We just show up and show up and show up. And meditation, the art of revealing the truth, will reveal sensitivity, receptivity, openness, acceptance, and seeing what is.

There's a poem from Kabir that I'd like to share. He says:

Don't go outside your house to see flowers, my friend.
Don't bother with that excursion.
Inside your body, there are flowers.
One flower has a thousand petals.
That will do for a place to sit.

Sitting there, you will have a glimpse of beauty
inside the body and out of it,
before gardens and after gardens.

So that quality of caring, of mettā, is definitely one that flavors life. And it gives the possibility of staying with the determination, the intention, the motivation of continuity. It's all about balance.

The last of the energizing factors is rapture. Energy brings rapture. It is that quality of joyful interest. And it quite spontaneously comes forth. It's that quality that brings tremendous freedom of understanding when there is joy, gladness in the mind—a happiness which comes spontaneously from connecting and being energized, interested, and mindful. That's, you can say, the fruit of all those qualities that have emerged. It's a meditative state. It's not a joy that is created from getting sense pleasures. It's truly dependent upon the quality of the mind.

And it has nothing to do with the content of the experience. I was astonished the first time that there was a very strong pain in the knee and rapture was living in the body. It happens.

The simile of that joyful interest is that of a person who has been walking in the desert for days. Imagine yourself walking in the desert for days, and in the distance you see a lake of cool, clear water. You can just imagine how you'd feel after walking for days in the desert—most probably it would bring up an intense joy. And that is that quality of intense joy in the mind. It comes out of a mind that has been nourished with interest and all the qualities that have been mentioned.

So that joyful interest gives the possibility of keeping interested. It's extraordinary. In those moments, not much effort is needed. We're truly quite happy and glad about our practice. These are the moments when we can relax back, and it's often easy to get seduced by the rapture, to feel attached to the gladness, attached to the joy. We may have the tendency to take that personally again, rather than seeing it as just a passing state. And if we do so, we'll see that this very beautiful quality of joyful interest can turn into an agitated state, a more tense state of overexcitement or exhilaration. It can feel like that in the body.

If there's an excess of rapture or joyful interest, it easily turns into agitation, restlessness. Therefore, we need to really see for ourselves how we can balance that type of quality in the mind with the factors that are calming. If it's totally in balance and

there's just that joyful interest, it brings forth the next quality, which is tranquility. So you can notice how these mental factors, these states of mind, work with one another. I'll be talking about the calming factors next week.

So you might want to see for yourself in your own practice when it is that mindfulness is present. Just see and relate in a way of staying curious. Notice when there's the presence or absence of interest, energy, gladness, happiness. The beauty and love of the truth of the Dhamma is revealed in each moment that we are present. It's that simple. So it's an encouragement to stay connected and intimate. And that will allow the arising of understanding about the nature of what is happening in the mind, what is happening in the body. It liberates the mind and heart here and now.

I'd like to close with a quote from T.S. Eliot, who says, "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

May we in each moment have the interest to know the place, whatever is happening, for the first time.

CHAPTER 17

Exploration of the Five Aggregates or 'Who I Am Not'

Myoshin Kelley · 52 min

> *In this dharma talk from the 2007 Three-Month Retreat at IMS, Myoshin Kelley offers a deep exploration of the five aggregates (pañcakkhandhā)—material form (rūpa), feeling tone (vedanā), perception (saññā), volitional formations (saṅkhārā), and consciousness (viññāṇa). Drawing from the suttas, she shares how the Buddha demonstrated that all five aggregates are impermanent, uncontrollable, and therefore not fit to be regarded as 'mine,' 'I,' or 'myself.' She includes the memorable story of the wanderer Saccaka who attempted to debate the Buddha on the nature of self, only to be humbled when he could not demonstrate control over any aggregate.*
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> *Kelley examines each aggregate in detail: the body as a play of the four elements (earth, water, fire, air); feeling tone as constantly shifting pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience; perception as the mind's rapid categorizing function; volitional formations as conditioning agents; and consciousness as the knowing faculty that arises dependently. The Buddha's similes illuminate their insubstantial nature—form like foam, feeling like water bubbles, formations like hollow heartwood, consciousness like a magician's trick.*
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> *The practical heart of this teaching lies in recognizing how we cling to these aggregates through appropriation ('this is mine') and identification ('I am this'). The contemplation 'this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself' serves as an antidote to these forms of attachment. As Ajahn Buddhadāsa teaches, we have been like thieves appropriating nature's phenomena as our own—wisdom means throwing everything back to nature and never again becoming attached.*

Tonight I wanted to begin an exploration of the five aggregates. This is going to be a two-part teaching—one part being tonight's talk, giving some information and context, and then tomorrow morning at the 8:15 sitting, it will be a guided meditation. One of the things I've really found about this topic is that when I first heard about the five aggregates, I had no interest. It seemed really dry. It was that part of the Buddha's description of dukkha where he names all of the different ways that we experience suffering, and the last bit is "in short, the five aggregates of clinging." That just fell off my radar screen and was of no interest.

Then I did some exploration, largely from looking at the suttas and the way in which the Buddha presented this material, and then really using it as a contemplation. I was amazed at the power of it. It took me right into the meat of practice—where this "I, me, mine" gets created—revealing it and helping me to see and hold experience in a different way, to have a wise relationship with all of these different aspects of experience. It's actually said to be a very powerful contemplation, one that we can use not only until we're fully liberated, but that Arahants apparently also continue to use.

I think it's a very important aspect of the teachings. Last week I spoke about impermanence, and then Annie spoke about dukkha a few nights ago. This teaching is a way of bringing in the aspect of anatta—the impersonal, insubstantial nature of experience. What was helpful for me is that it involved looking to experience rather than having some philosophical idea about it. It was actually looking in my own experience and getting in touch with the play of conditions coming together, just the simplicity of it. Much of what I will say tonight you have already heard in different ways, but combined with the contemplation that the Buddha offers, it becomes very powerful.

Before I go into the aggregates themselves, I want to share a couple of ways that the Buddha spoke directly about them. He brought in impermanence and uncontrollability. The Buddha highlighted the fact that all experience is impermanent, and out of that he brings in the aspect that it's not fit to be regarded as self.

Going back to an actual sutta where the Buddha was speaking, he said: "What do you think—are material form, feelings, perceptions, formations, and consciousness permanent or impermanent?"

The monks responded: "Impermanent, Venerable Sir."

"Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?"

"Suffering, Venerable Sir."

"Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is myself'?"

"No, Venerable Sir."

"Therefore, bhikkhus, any kind of material form, feelings, perceptions, formations, or consciousness—whether past, future, or present; internal or external; gross or subtle; inferior or superior; far or near—should be seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.'"

All of these experiences—material form, feeling tone, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness—together are what we so often identify with in our own experience as being self. As we pay attention, as we have been in our practice, there is a seeing of this truth of impermanence. And this truth of impermanence means that there's no lasting happiness to be found in these experiences.

The other aspect that the Buddha pointed to in showing these aggregates as impersonal and insubstantial was that they are uncontrollable, ungovernable, not amenable to our will. I'd like to share a story from the suttas about this.

There was a wanderer named Saccaka who had heard from one of the first five disciples of the Buddha that the Buddha was teaching that form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness were all impermanent and not self. Upon hearing this, he decided to visit the Buddha and set him straight, as he believed there was a self. It is said that he had not yet made a study of the Buddhist teachings and had no practical knowledge of the Dhamma, and yet he had a poor opinion of it. He felt that he himself was very much above it.

He organized for others to attend a debate, where he boasted that he would whirl the Blessed One around in the matter of doctrines, just like a powerful man catching hold of a kid by his fleece would whirl it around and around.

In his encounter with the Buddha, the Buddha first got Saccaka to admit that he believed that material form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness were self. Then he backed him into a corner, saying: "You said form is my self. Could you exercise control over that self, saying, 'Let this self of mine be thus, let this self be not thus'?"

At first Saccaka would not answer. It was only when the Buddha asked him for the third time, warning him that he had better answer the question, that he finally had to respond.

Because apparently if a Buddha asks you a question three times and you fail to answer, your head will split into seven pieces. And it's also said that there was a celestial ogre, visible only to the Buddha and Sakaka, armed with a thunderbolt ready to split open Sakaka's head.

So he answered. There was no control. There was no control over material form, feelings, perceptions, volitional formations, and consciousness. I think he was probably humbled.

And then the Buddha asked whether these forms were impermanent or permanent. And if they were impermanent, is it suffering? And what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change—is it fit to be regarded as "this is mine, this I am, this is myself"? No, Lord.

The Buddha went on to tell him how to undertake a meditation practice to become an Arahant, and how, after realization, all of the physical and mental aggregates are seen as not mine, not I, and not myself.

So we can't decide to have our bodies be a certain way. It just doesn't work. We know that. The body is simply not amenable to our will. And the Buddha is essentially saying, if it was self, couldn't you do something better than this?

As we look at each of the aggregates—and this I'll be bringing in again tomorrow when we're really looking at direct experience in the moment—it's about seeing all of these aggregates and recognizing how they are impermanent, how we can't bend them or make them the way we want things to be, and as such they are not fit to be regarded as I, me, or mine.

The first of the five aggregates is that of material form, physical form. I mentioned last week in speaking about impermanence that often there's such a strong sense of self around this body, such identification with it. The exploration we can undertake, in being aware of this body moment by moment, is to explore it on the level of the elements—that it's made up of earth, air, fire, and water, as is all physical form. A combination of these elements, a weaving of these elements. And the experience of our body can change according to what elements are more predominant in any one moment.

Gil Fronsdal, a teacher from Spirit Rock, once referred to this body as being made up of recycled materials. It's just this play, these changing elements. Our breath inside can be moisture outside in a moment. It's all changing, interplaying.

So we look in our experience to how we feel the earth element. The earth element provides support for coexisting phenomena. It gives that level or sense of support. We experience the earth element through sensations of hardness, softness, solidity. It's not that we think of the earth, the ground, but we can touch water, and sometimes water will feel very soft, and that softness is the earth element. When we feel pressure, hardness—this is earth element.

We experience the water element, which gives cohesiveness. In bread dough, it's the water that holds it all together. This is what water does—it gives that cohesion. We experience water element if we feel a stickiness on the floor or a feeling of wetness in the

corner of our eye. Sometimes that wetness may actually be there, and sometimes it's just the feeling of wetness. Heaviness too is a form of the water element, because it's bringing that cohesion of something being held together.

The air element's characteristics are extension and expansion. The air element is what allows us to walk or to sit. We experience it through vibrations, through motion. It causes movement.

The fire element is not just hot but also cold—cold is another aspect of the fire element. This fire element helps things to mature, to break down. Sometimes in our practice these sensations become so predominant, so strong, that just in a moment the body may feel on fire, or in another moment it may be very cold. Our body is just made up of a play of these movements.

And yet, in any single movement in walking, it's possible to experience all of the elements. If you're feeling the foot on the floor, there's a hardness. Lifting the foot, there's the air element, movement, vibration.

Sometimes when we place the foot down, there's a coolness, the fire element. The water element manifests when there's a feeling of heaviness. Looking at experience on the level of elements, it's similar to nature. We so often get caught up in trying to control these elements, and yet the body does its thing. It simply responds to different conditions. It's similar to a hurricane—we can't control that. And many elements of the body in the same way are uncontrollable. They're just these shifting elements.

The Buddha likened this material element to being like a ball of foam—very insubstantial. When we look at these elements, they're changing so quickly, so interrelated. As we pay attention to these physical phenomena, realizing "this is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself," it becomes a contemplation—seeing experience from this perspective rather than the pain of it belonging to me, my body, trying to control, not accepting impermanence.

The second aggregate is that of feeling tone. This is the pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant quality of experience. A few reminders on this: it's a common experience that we strongly identify with these feeling tones and act, live our lives in relationship to them. We move away from unpleasant experience, we move towards pleasant experience. When somebody asks us how we are today, and if there's a predominance of pleasant experience, we could be doing quite well. If there's a lot of unpleasant experience, "Oh, not so good today." If there's a lot of neutral experience, "Oh, so-so." We commonly define ourselves according to this feeling tone.

And this feeling tone, like everything else, is conditioned. The feeling tone of experience is a resultant karma—how we experience something in one moment can be conditioned by how it was related to in past experience. So there's not an inherent feeling tone. One person can experience something as pleasant; another person may experience it as unpleasant. And what can be pleasant in one moment can be very unpleasant in another moment. If we're eating a bar of chocolate, the first bite is pleasant. If it's a huge one-pound bar, by the time we get to the last bite, it's probably unpleasant. Things change.

This is a very powerful aspect of experience to pay attention to. We begin to notice how quickly it changes. If there's any identification, you can have the experience as if you're touching into heaven and hell in just moment to moment as pleasant and unpleasant alternate. And then you begin to notice how difficult it can be to pay attention when experience is more neutral. When we don't pay attention, ignorance comes in. This false sense of self comes in.

The Buddha likened feeling tone to being like water bubbles—bursting, insubstantial, impermanent. These too we can reflect on: "This is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself."

The third aggregate is that of perception. Perception is the faculty in the mind that can recognize, name, label, categorize things. It's this expedited filing system that we have in the mind. It's quite phenomenal in its capacity—it works so quickly. Just when looking at the front of the hall, there are forms that become man, woman, that become specific beings. All kinds of information is received very, very quickly. The mind just goes through and cobbles together this information to organize things into perception.

It's definitely a useful quality in our lives, but identification with it can create a lot of suffering, solidifying experience, not allowing for the truth of impermanence. And we can experience the ungovernability or the oppressive nature of perception because we receive all kinds of perceptions. You're sitting here, really quiet, and then some memory from the past comes up. It's just a perception in the mind, and yet it can have such a strong impact. Or you're eating a bowl of luscious strawberries and suddenly there's a perception of a corpse, and the whole interest in eating the strawberries disappears. Perceptions have strong impact.

Perceptions at times can be deeply fearful. And yet even these can be examined through the lens of "this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself."

The next aggregate is that of volitional formations—the conditioning agent in the mind, that which conditions acts of body, speech, and mind. These formations bring about physical, vocal, or mental activities. Our mind states also condition experience: when anger is present, it conditions acts of body, speech, and mind. Loving-kindness conditions them. Compassion conditions them. Wisdom conditions them. These formations come together and shape our experience. They are karmic seeds, tiny sparks that can be either wholesome or unwholesome. These formations are like weather coming together—the atmosphere that conditions.

We can see how they too are impermanent, not lasting, continually changing. They are not amenable to our will. We cannot decide to be mindful all the time. We cannot decide to have a mind filled only with loving-kindness. The Buddha likened these volitional formations to the heartwood of a Bodhi tree, which is empty, void, without substance. These too can be seen as "this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself."

The last of the five aggregates is consciousness, which we have already spoken of. I was actually glad to go through the five aggregates tonight and see that we are doing our job, that we are speaking of all these aspects of experience. This aspect of consciousness—the knowing—is the subject of so much debate, and it is so mysterious, so awesome.

Just today I was reading about how in the last decade scientists were doing great exploration of the brain, dedicating substantial financial resources to it. Someone was making a motion to secure four billion dollars for a decade of exploring the mind rather than the brain—looking into consciousness itself and its mystery, trying to really crack this one. Who knows what they will find? But it is one of the great wonders: that we can sit here and know experience. We don't do anything to know. It just happens.

And this is where, for me, it gets interesting. In a moment of hearing, there is something making the sound, there is the ear door, and there is consciousness. Consciousness acts as a spark, a place of ignition between these two aspects of experience. In a moment of hearing, we have hearing consciousness. In a moment of seeing, we have seeing consciousness. There is a sight, there is the eye door, and then consciousness sparks.

As we sit here, there is a moment of knowing hearing consciousness, a moment of knowing seeing consciousness, a moment of knowing touching consciousness—and it is all rapidly arising and passing away. When we don't pay attention, we think this knowing is always there. But with careful attention, we actually see this dependent relationship.

Through exploration, we also see that we cannot control it. We cannot decide to be conscious of only certain aspects of experience, hard as we may try. This is simply not the way things are—it is not amenable to our will.

One of the ways the Buddha likened consciousness was to a monkey going through a forest, catching one bough of a tree and then another and another. This is what consciousness does by day and by night. He also likened consciousness to a magician's display of magic tricks—it creates an illusion of things when we don't bring wise attention. Consciousness too can be contemplated as "this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself."

Sometimes we can become too intellectual around investigating the five aggregates, trying to define where one finishes and the next begins. That won't be so helpful. What matters is knowing that they are the very substance of our experience—what we can look directly and immediately into. Together, when we're not looking closely, there it is: "Here I am. This is me. I am this." But when we look into what's being identified with in any moment, we can see it is one of these aggregates or some combination of them.

This is a very immediate way of picking apart this sense of "I," pulling up the stitches of what seems so solid and concrete. The clinging to these aggregates—not the aggregates themselves—is what is painful, what is suffering, what is dukkha. It is the identification with them as being I, me, or mine that creates this suffering.

There are two ways that clinging happens: through appropriation or possessing, and through identification.

This is mine. It belongs to me. Looking through the day to see what is mine—my body, my breath, what belongs to me. Sometimes you can just hear it in the tone of "mine." You see self asserting itself. My walking space. My cushion. This is mine. My interview time. See what belongs. What you possess. Look for that voice. It's really fertile ground for greed, hatred, and delusion.

This is from Ajahn Buddhadasa: "It is usually proclaimed eloquently that birth, aging, and death are suffering, but birth is not suffering, aging is not suffering, death is not suffering where there is not attachment to my birth, my aging, and my death. At the moment we are grasping aging, pain, and death as ours—if we don't grasp, they are not suffering. They are only bodily changes."

The second way of clinging is that of identification, or taking as a basis for conceit or view about oneself. I am feeling happy. I am depressed. I am superior. I am inferior.

Venerable Anālayo, a Western monk I think we may have mentioned before, has a very good description of how the five aggregates play into this. He says, "These five aggregates are experienced as embodiments of the notion 'I am.' From the unawakened point of view, the material body is where I am. Feelings are how I am. Perceptions are what I am. Volitions are why I am. And consciousness is whereby I am. In this way, each aggregate offers its own contribution to enacting the reassuring illusion that 'I am.'"

So material body—where I am. Feelings—how I am. Perceptions—what I am. Volitions—why I am. And consciousness—whereby I am. It's an interesting way of looking at this notion that "I am."

I think it's really helpful to know that this conceit of "I am" is around until complete enlightenment, and that how we practice is to recognize when it's present and how it comes into being.

This is a poem I wrote at the end of a retreat. It's not that I sit on retreat and write poems, but there had been exploration of this sense of self. It's called "Taking Life Lightly":

Letting go of me and the story that I weave, who'd ever thought how fun it could be? For all of the places I've clutched and defended, for all of the tears I've cried from grief, sorrow, loss, or the suffering of me.

My fingers grew tired. They had clutched so hard and now dared to relax and to loosen their grip. Moments of peace, tranquility, and joy, a lightness of heart in this empty, cognizant, ever-changing space.

And then there I'd be again, the one that wants and needs. I'd shrink and recoil at the very sight of me. Each time that I'd come, at some point I'd pass, letting go again of the suffering of me.

Now I keep arising, but there's a giggle inside for jumping at opportunities of a birthplace for me. Each time that they pop, it's no more poor me, but laughter and humor as the mind becomes free.

Letting go of this me, or just allowing life to be—who'd ever thought, without ever thinking, that it belongs to me?

This is our practice.

I'd like to take a brief look at the contemplation, this line that I keep referring to: "This is not mine, this I am not, and this is not myself." Just to look at the three lines.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, in his commentary, describes each of these as being antidotes to aspects of self. This first line—"this is not mine"—is an antidote to the appropriation of self, where there's this sense of ownership. Through this line, "this is not mine," it counters the "this is mine." It's helpful when we're responding to experience as belonging to us, because in our lives we so easily move into protection of what is mine. It's a common experience.

Protect, defend, make perfect—and at times, just remembering: this is not mine.

The second line, "this I am not," is an antidote to the conceit of "I am this, I am that"—this conceit of "I am," this perception that "I am." Seeing it in this way: this I am not.

The third line, "this is not myself," relates to identity views, the view of there being a separate entity. Seeing it thus: this is not myself.

In the English language, the word "self" is used often like a noun. And when we look in our experience, it's more of a verb. It's always changing. This is what we see through looking into these five aggregates—that they're coming together due to certain conditions, certain formations. Things change, experience changes, and within that there's no solid, separate, unchanging self to whom it all refers.

We see that this sense of "I" is really like a river that's continually flowing, not the same in any two moments. We find that this whole construct of I, me, mine, belonging to me, starts to break down. Life becomes fluid, with this strong sense of self no longer being the view through which we're looking. And the landscape opens up. There comes a lightness of being that is uncontained, not defined by who we think we are.

I'd like to close tonight with a teaching from Ajahn Buddhadasa. He says:

"To understand the Dhamma sufficiently is the first step, but understanding it is not the end. We now see that as the mind begins to let go, to loosen up its attachments, these attachments dissolve away. We experience this until the point where attachment is extinguished. Once attachment is quenched, the final step is to experience that the mind is free, everything is free.

The Pali texts use the phrase 'throwing back.' The Buddha said that at the end, we throw everything back. This means that we have been thieves all of our lives by appropriating the things of nature as I and mine. We have been stupid and have suffered for it. Now we have become wise and are able to give things up. At this last step of practice, we realize: Oh, it isn't mine. It belongs to nature. We throw everything back to nature and never again steal anything.

To learn the secret of Dhamma is to know that we should be attached to nothing whatsoever, and then never again to become attached to anything. All is liberated. The case is closed. We are finished."

So let's just sit for a moment.

This body—one of the five aggregates. Knowing it directly and immediately through its hardness, softness, coolness, warmth, pressure, vibrations. All impermanent, changing, not amenable to our will.

Feeling tone of experience. Sometimes pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Is this who you really are? Is it subject to change? Uncontrollable.

Perception. Perceptions of sounds being heard. Perceptions of the body, perceptions of memories, thoughts. Are they stable? Can you control them? Are they who you really are?

Volitional formations, the conditioning agent. Maybe anger, desire, compassion. They too—impermanent, subject to change.

A moment of hearing consciousness. Touching consciousness. Smelling consciousness. Knowing moment by moment.

All of these aggregates arising and passing. All impermanent, ungovernable.

This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself.

CHAPTER 18

Guided Meditation on the Five Aggregates

Myoshin Kelley · 37 min

> *In this guided meditation, Myoshin Kelley leads practitioners through a direct experiential investigation of the five aggregates (pañcakkhandhā) as taught in the Buddha's discourses. Rather than approaching the khandhas conceptually, this practice invites participants to examine each aggregate as it arises in present-moment experience, recognizing their conditioned, impermanent, and not-self nature.*
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> *The meditation systematically explores each aggregate: material form (rūpa) through the four great elements—earth, fire, air, and water—experienced as hardness, temperature, movement, and moisture; feeling tone (vedanā) as the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality inherent in every experience; perception (saññā) as the labeling and organizing capacity of mind; volitional formations (saṅkhārā) including intentions, mental states, and the conditioning agents that produce kamma; and consciousness (viññāṇa) as the knowing quality arising at each sense door.*
>
> *Kelley guides practitioners to apply the Buddha's teaching of wise attention to each aggregate, recognizing "this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself." She concludes with a passage from the suttas emphasizing that all aggregates—whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle—should be seen with proper wisdom as not-self. This practice offers a foundation for developing liberating insight into the three characteristics of existence.*

This morning we explore the five aggregates through guided meditation.

These five aggregates are aspects of experience that continually arise and pass away. When we cling to any of these aggregates as being self, this is suffering, because all of these aggregates are conditioned, subject to change, and not amenable to our will.

Acknowledging that all of the five aggregates arise together: in the arising of material form, there is contact which creates pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience. We need perception to identify the experience, consciousness to know the experience, and intention to act.

First, let us look at material form—this body that we so often relate to as being ours. How do we experience this body? What do we know for ourselves about this body? Laying aside the conceptual level of the body and what we think we know, we look into direct experience.

We come to know the elements. The earth element: hardness, softness. The fire element: there might be sensations where the skin meets the air—coolness or warmth. In areas of pressure, there might be a lot of heat. The air element: movement, vibration, expansion, contraction, gurgling in the stomach, wind. The water element: moisture in the mouth and the eyes, inferred by the sensation of heaviness, which is matter being held together.

In just one breath, there may be awareness of softness as earth element, coolness as fire, vibrations as air. All of these elements arise and disappear. Are you the vibrations? Are you the softness? Are you the heaviness? Can you control this body, these elements? Or are they simply unfolding according to natural laws, conditioned?

With awareness of the material form, we can see: this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.

Looking at the second aggregate, vedana, the feeling tone—the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality present in any aspect of experience, be it body sensation, sound, mental image, thought, or emotion. It is the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality that arises with immediate impact or contact, not once we have analyzed the appearance.

Touch points may feel soft, cushiony, and be experienced as pleasant. Or there may be hardness, throbbing—unpleasant. Seeing it in its arising, is there a reaction to this awareness? A joy, a delight, when we like it, when it is pleasant? Or is the reaction to push it away? Or not to notice?

What is it like when the pleasant is seen as simply pleasant, not defining self by it? Unpleasant as just that? If pleasant experience is there and it changes, are we left craving, wanting it back?

Notice how in any experience, through any of the sense doors, one of these qualities is present. This quality is a conditioned and transient process, conditioned through the consequences of past actions. The reaction to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral can be deeply conditioned. But when we learn to bring wise attention, we are no longer manipulated by these experiences. They are seen as: this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.

The third aggregate is perception, that which labels or organizes, which can distinguish breath from sound, from touch, from smells, sights, thoughts, or mind states.

Sound arises, and through this organizing capacity, we can recognize it as the ocean's voice—different from a mechanical noise or a bodily sound.

There can be different levels of perception. On one level, perceiving the ocean's voice; on another level, the perception can simply be of hearing, or of vibration.

Now bring the attention to the whole body. Hold the perception of the whole body and see what happens. Does the perception remain the same? Or are there experiences that jump out? Perception changing as the experiences change.

How things are perceived can be very powerful. Perhaps there's an area in the body that's in pain. Take a moment to focus on it, focusing on it as pain. And then let go of the naming of pain and instead simply know the qualities that are present—tightness, heat, vibrations, stabbing. Perception recognizes these qualities. Is there a difference to perceive it as pain or as the qualities?

Through our practice, there's a refining of perception.

In a moment of perception, is there the sense that *I* am perceiving? Or is this just what happens when sense door contact occurs? This data continually being received, arising and passing, changing, not amenable to our will. With wise attention, seeing: this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.

Looking now at the aggregate of volitional formations—that conditioning agent in the mind that produces karma.

For a moment, turn the attention to the breath. There was an intention to do so. Any little shifts in the body have intention before movement. Intention can be known through thought, or as the urge or impulse, the gathering of energy.

We have the intention to be mindful. It has an effect. There may be a period of getting lost in thought, and then the intention arises again.

Mind states are also conditioning agents. Notice if any hindrances are present—desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, or doubt. Do these states affect the thoughts? The kinds of thoughts? Is there an effect in the body?

Can you control these volitional formations? Can you choose to be mindful moment after moment? Can you choose to have a mind filled with loving-kindness? Or does it suddenly shift, change?

Are these formations who you really are? Are you the anger? Are you the desire? Are you the sleepiness? Or are these experiences arising out of certain conditions, being known, and changing?

With wise attention we see: this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.

Looking now at the aggregate of consciousness—the knowing quality.

A sound is made, it hits the ear door, and hearing consciousness arises. As the sound disappears, is the hearing consciousness still there?

When we relax, things are known of their own accord when the mind is undistracted. Sitting here, so many experiences being known—hearing, body sensations, sights, images, thoughts, mind states. It's knowing: spontaneous, impermanent, changing. Not amenable to our will.

Wisely seeing: this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.

From the Buddha: "What do you think—are material form, feelings, perceptions, formations, and consciousness permanent or impermanent?"

Impermanent, Venerable Sir.

Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?

Suffering, Venerable Sir.

Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: This is mine, this I am, this is myself?

No, Venerable Sir.

Therefore, bhikkhus, any kind of material form, feelings, perceptions, formations, or consciousness—whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—should be seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself.

Ehipassiko—this means "come and see." The Dhamma is calling everyone to come and see, to meditate upon this truth directly.

There are just a few minutes remaining this morning if there are any questions.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 19

The Seven Factors of Awakening - Part 2

Patricia Genoud-Feldman · 59 min

In this second part of her exploration of the seven factors of awakening (satta bojjhaṅga), Patricia Genoud-Feldman illuminates how these qualities work together to support the path toward freedom. She begins by grounding the teaching in the Four Noble Truths, emphasizing that the Buddha's sole purpose was helping beings understand suffering, its cause, and its cessation. Drawing from both Tibetan and Advaita teachers, she demonstrates how the essence of transformation—investigating and understanding the mind through alert attention—transcends tradition.

The talk examines both the energizing factors (investigation, energy, and joy) and the tranquilizing factors (tranquility, concentration, and equanimity). Patricia brings these abstract qualities to life through Ajahn Chah's powerful account of facing his lifelong terror of ghosts in a cremation ground—a vivid illustration of how the factors of awakening can manifest even alongside deep fear, ultimately leading to profound insight into impermanence and not-self.

Particularly valuable is Patricia's nuanced discussion of concentration (samādhi), warning against attachment to calm states while emphasizing that steadiness of mindfulness—not forcing focus—allows the mind to settle naturally. She explores equanimity as the culmination of balanced practice, using the image of an unwavering mountain. The talk concludes with Ajahn Buddhadāsa's teaching on plowing fields with the factors of awakening, demonstrating how these qualities can transform any daily activity into practice.

You know the topic of the dharma talk—the second part of the Factors of Awakening.

This teaching on the seven factors of awakening helps us move towards understanding. And what is it that we understand? Well, basically, we're seeing the four noble truths. Again and again, we're seeing suffering, the cause of suffering, and sometimes we see the end of suffering. And what we're practicing is the path.

The Buddha said over and over again that his only interest in teaching the Dhamma was exactly for that reason—that we see suffering, that we understand its cause, and that we can end it. And it's really possible to end suffering. That's why we're here. Otherwise there wouldn't be any meaning for us to be sitting here hours after hours and doing our walking.

Now, whatever we think, and you might wonder about techniques or ways of practice, the essence of the teaching is the same, whether we're practicing Tibetan Buddhism or even Vedanta. I'd like to offer two different quotes from two different sources. One is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, a Tibetan teacher. The other one is from Nisargadatta Maharaj, who wrote *I Am That*—he's an Advaita Indian non-duality teacher. You'll see how close these two quotes are, and it's just fascinating to see how, in the essence of the path, we are meant to learn in a way that will end by seeing exactly what it is that we can transform.

The first quote is this: "The capability of human life is beyond our imagination. This capability is unique. What counts is the human capacity to investigate and transform our own mind and the world around us in a powerful and positive direction."

I think that we can say that we're doing this, that it's our aspiration to transform our mind, and then through understanding our mind, we transform the world around us in a powerful and positive direction in the way that we can.

The second quote says: "By being with yourself, by watching yourself in your practice with alert interest, with the intention to understand rather than to judge, in full acceptance of whatever may emerge because it is there, you encourage the deep to come to the surface and enrich your life and consciousness with its captive energies. This is the great work of mindfulness, of awareness. It removes obstacles and releases energies by understanding the nature of life and mind. Wisdom is the door to freedom and alert attention is the mother of wisdom."

Isn't that beautiful? Wisdom is the door to freedom and alert attention is the mother of wisdom.

We probably understand a little bit more by now, with the dharma talks and our inner process, about what this transformation is about and how it happens. It manifests with the activation of positive qualities that are lying deep within us. It's not that we don't have them. We call forth this incredible, powerful force of alert attention, mindfulness, that enables the understanding moment by moment. It's this direct seeing that has the capacity to transform the mind. And it's not due to our beliefs, our ideas, our concepts that we will do so. It really is not about representing ourselves a better path.

So it's not about bending the mind to change it through ideas, or changing other people because we don't like the way they're behaving. It's really allowing this process of understanding, which requires a greater and greater acceptance of what is. And that is mindfulness, which will lead to greater mindfulness that will enable that transformation.

With the power of mindfulness, there are six other qualities that we have at our disposal that will help us see through the ideas, the thoughts, the concepts, and touch into our inherent nature.

Just as a reminder, in case you've forgotten what they are: there are three arousing qualities, which are investigation, energy, and joy or rapture. Once mindfulness connects, investigates, penetrates, and explores, we really see through the nature and understand phenomena as it is. It raises the level of interest, and it has the power to lighten up that which has been in the dark, that which we haven't seen.

This exploration leads one to have more and more energy. That interest brings energy or courage—strength of heart. And that natural interest just develops over and over again. That desire to keep going really becomes quite natural.

The joy or the rapture is not that we see only something pleasant. It's the joy or the rapture of seeing the truth, of connecting with the reality and enabling that to be okay. Seeing the truth and not moving away from what is presented to us, even if there are afflictive emotions, difficult mind states.

It's important here to realize that these factors of awakening manifest all along, even if there is the presence of a very deeply rooted difficult emotion. Rebecca talked about difficult mind states on Friday night and how we can bring balance as we're practicing. It's exactly those qualities of the seven factors which are clearly manifesting, even though we don't notice it at times.

We're so entangled in trying to meet fear or sadness or anger that we're not noticing that in reality there is a nourishment of those factors of awakening.

And I'd like to read a story which really illustrates this very well. It's an incredible illustration of how one can be on the path, stay on the path, and release one of the deepest difficult emotions.

This is a story from Ajahn Chah's book, and he's telling it himself. In Thailand, there's a very strong ghost culture. When children hear scary stories, there are always ghosts in them. And they're really nasty and gory, filled with all sorts of blood and guts and evil and malevolence. Even here, perhaps we don't hear so much about ghosts, but in a child, that's where fear can really manifest quite strongly, quite powerfully.

This fear was one of the greatest fears that the great Thai forest master Ajahn Chah had in himself. It was something that really bothered him. He had been a monk for quite some time and was well aware that he had been avoiding this fear. It was something he had never really wanted to meet, really resolve. He was known to be a self-reli-

ant and strong monk, yet also known to have extreme fear of these ghosts. When going alone to practice in the forest, he would continually recite protective verses to keep the ghosts away—which was probably one good means.

Once in his practice, he decided to go straight at this fear, to have the strength of heart. He had run away from it long enough; he was going to face it.

So Ajahn Chah decided to set up his mosquito net and camp in the burning ground outside the village where he had been staying. You should imagine the burning ground to be a place where there would be full exposure of ghosts—what in his mind was ghost, but what we might see as spirits or corpses.

He said it took every ounce of his effort to put one foot in front of the other to enter the burning ground. As dusk was falling, his mind was screaming: "Don't be ridiculous. Don't do this. It's not good for your practice. Be reasonable. Maybe you can do this later, another time, next year, when you'll have your practice more together."

Don't we do this?

But he willed himself to stay and set up his camping place. Once he put up the mosquito net, he went in and just sat there. There had been a funeral of a child that day, and Ajahn Chah had been fine since everyone was around.

Then during that first night, he became so afraid he just locked himself in one spot. When dawn came, he said to himself, "Oh, great, I've done it. I've done my cremation ground thing. I'm off." But then he realized and said to himself, "No, no, no. That's not transcending fear. That's just enduring. I haven't gotten through this at all. I'm still absolutely terrified. I can give myself the excuse that I don't have to do it, but the terror is still here in me. I need to stay tonight."

He hoped there wouldn't be another burning that evening. But sure enough, an adult had died and was cremated that day. During the day, everyone was around, and again he was fine. As soon as night came, he was left alone. All that was left was his mosquito net for protection and himself.

You might think that a mosquito net is not a great protection, but to Ajahn Chah it felt like a fortress circled with seven concentric walls. He says in his autobiography, "Even the presence of my alms bowl was reassuring."

He made the resolution to sit there and to be with his emotions, with the fear. The night before, there had been familiar noises, nothing special. On the second night, things changed. He was sitting there around midnight when he thought he heard footsteps. Ajahn Chah was sitting there thinking, "I hear footsteps. It's not an animal. It's a two-footed creature. And the person is coming from the fire."

So he said to himself, "Don't be ridiculous. Maybe it's one of the villagers coming to see if I'm all right. Maybe they've come to offer me something, and if they do, they will come up and say hello." Nevertheless, he had taken the resolve to stay seated with his eyes closed.

Then he heard these footsteps—thump, thump, thump—getting closer and closer. He started to tighten up. The sweat poured out of him, and he told himself, "Oh, don't panic. It's just one of the villagers with heavy steps." But in his mind, he could see the skeleton with guts hanging out, eyes dropping down the cheek, and a half-burnt mouth. It really happens to all of us, doesn't it?

As he felt this mess of flesh walking towards him, he told himself, "Don't believe this. This is just your imagination. Stop. Be still. Concentrate and let go of the fear." Meanwhile, the footsteps were getting closer and closer. Then he heard the steps going around and around him—thump, thump, thump—circling around him.

By this time, he was in a state of white-hot fear. He had gone beyond anxiety. His body was locked solid and sweating bullets; he was absolutely rigid. Then this presence came and stood right in front of him. Achan Cha was still determined not to open his eyes, and at this point he was so completely fear-stricken that it burst. The fear system was going at absolutely full force when suddenly he had the thought: all these years I've been reciting, "The body is impermanent, feeling is impermanent. The body is not self, feelings are not self."

So he was afraid, but he was also very concentrated and alert. The insight flashed into his mind: even if this is some terrible ghost or monster that is going to attack me, all that it can attack is that which is not me. And instantly the feelings of terror evaporated. It was like switching on a light. The fear disappeared completely, and he went into an incredibly joyful state. He went straight from total dukkha, total pain, to an extraordinary bliss.

His mind was very alert, and as that happened, he heard the footsteps getting fainter. Eventually, the footsteps disappeared. He never found out their source. Achan Cha sat there without moving until dawn. During the night, it poured. Tears of rapture ran

down his face and mixed with the rain. Nothing in the world could have moved him. He was now in a pure state of calm, of rest, in a place of true refuge, in a safe place. And he remembered the Buddha saying that the place of complete refuge is within.

That is it. Regardless of the situation, no matter what I meet, he told himself, it is just a matter of doing the practice.

It's amazing. It's just exactly what we're doing here. And there are so many ways that this process is emerging for us. Even if we have many contours and we take a lot of different pathways, this is our practice. And very clearly, the factors of awakening were there, adjacent to the fear. This is exactly what is happening for us all, because otherwise we wouldn't be able to do the path. It would be really too difficult.

So that gladness is where we stay. That rapture is essential. When we meet times when there is that quality of energy which brings up that rapture, it uplifts the heart and mind and gives us strength of courage.

Now, like I said the other night, rapture can easily move into extremes. We can have some lightness, but we get very excited about the rapture or the joy that is present, and it gets out of hand. There's over-excitement, over-exuberance, which raises the level of energy too much, and that's when we feel restlessness. We then need to relax.

In my own practice, I've had a lot of this at the beginning. Seeing Sayadaw U Pandita quite frequently in my interviews, I think for at least three weeks the advice was one phrase. He was just saying, "You are too excited."

Cultivate peace. And my response was, how do I do that? He says, mindfulness will take care of it. Mindfulness balances. Just stay present. Don't get excited about what is happening. And it wasn't seeing fantastic things, I can say. It was just the revelation of this physical energy that was manifesting, which is a kind of rapture, and that I was getting caught in for some of the times.

So the three energizing factors need to be balanced with the three tranquilizing factors. Tranquility often comes after we've experienced some ease in the body and the mind. It's said that tranquility is nourished by ease of well-being in the body and in the mind, just like in Ajahn Chah's story or the Buddha's enlightenment story, where it's said that he stayed completely still for a number of days, just couldn't move from the state of peace. Well, that was ultimate peace, wasn't it?

It's said that tranquility is like the cool shade of a tree to a person that has been in the hot sun. It's a state of mind that we can relax into for a moment. And often we miss that moment because we're already heading to meet the next experience. That's why

when we say if it's kind of neutral, if there's not much happening, just allow yourself to meet that experience. Let go of the tension and there's no need to search for another experience. This is when we allow ourselves to be receptive and can let go of the tendency to control, to want another experience. And we just miss the quality of calm, of tranquility.

It's extremely helpful if we've had a cycle of turmoil, whether with a physical sensation or with a mind state, something which has been really difficult. It's helpful to notice when that is changing, when there is a release in the mind, in the body, and to just allow that calm, that state of no intensity, to be there. And to not confuse that for boredom. Calm and boredom can be confused, because suddenly the shift of the present experience can be so different that we might say, okay, now what? And miss the possibility of calm.

This is a quote from Ajahn Chah. He says, "Try to be mindful and let things take their natural course." And that's what calm does. "Then your mind will become still in any surroundings like a clear forest pool. All kinds of wonderful, rare animals will come to drink at the pool and you will clearly see the nature of all things. You will see many strange and wonderful things come and go, but you will be still." This is a form of happiness.

We're so not used to it because in our lives, the intensity is just so heightened that that state of calm is often not valued. In our practice, it's a factor of awakening. So do remember that. Step into the coolness of the shade whenever it is possible for you. Don't miss the opportunities.

Now, that tranquility happens with the changing flow of experiences. There was a point in my practice when I thought that I would experience stillness only when everything would stop—like not feeling the breath anymore, for example. Really kind of thinking that there was a possibility of stopping the breath. And it's not that at all that we're talking about. It's the mindfulness that is steady enough and that allows us to be just present with what is.

So again, it's a factor of awakening which is not belonging to anyone. It's not personal. We can't control it. You can't say, okay, now I'm going to be calm. You might welcome that factor of enlightenment or quality in a way that it's true—if we incline the mind towards those factors rather than towards stress or restlessness, they do come forth more easily. And so it's quite helpful to show up and to say, hey, what is happening right here? Is there calm? And to notice what's happening. What is the experience being received, and then letting go?

Now, the habit of doing in our practice is something that needs to be seen. Whatever form you have of doing something is just preventing one from enabling the deepening process in our practice.

Doing in the way that we might want to change things, the course of events. It may be a doing where we're constantly seeking new experiences. "Oh, I've seen that already." And what can we see that's a new experience after three and a half weeks of practice here? So it's that constant seeking for something we haven't seen before.

It may be that we're ignoring something that wants to be showing itself. Just like Ajahn Chah, who went through a whole process, years of ignoring his fear, and then suddenly one day opening to, "Oh, I don't think I can really further my practice or develop my practice if I don't give some time to this particular experience." So it's possible that there's a sense of ignoring or avoiding.

As we notice doing, we might just be aware of that attitude in the mind, and it already gives a relief. There's an energetic release when we notice that that's what's happening—that there's constantly a manipulation being held there in the background. And to appreciate the fact of allowing ourselves to see that and pull back.

One of my teachers says the only real thing that you need to do is to show up. And then the rest is up to the flow of changing experiences, the natural law of Dhamma. He says often people show up and then what happens is they want a specific experience, which is then an interference.

So the second stabilizing factor is that steadiness or concentration which comes from that attitude of calm, of receptivity, of allowing, of stillness. With all the factors we've mentioned before, very spontaneously in a way, the mind comes back to a collectedness. There's a gathering of that energy that allows one to stay present. It's that ability to stay with experience.

Now it's important to realize that we are not here emphasizing one particular experience, and you've probably understood that by now—that it's not about focusing only on one object. Because we're doing vipassana practice, and the purpose of our practice here is to see things as they are. So what is it that is steady? What is it that is stabilized, collected? It's the power of mindfulness itself. That one-pointedness is the steadiness of mindfulness. Mindfulness does not only land on experience, on whatever is present, but it can rest and allow us to see all the different appearances that land in the mind, moment by moment.

With time, when there is steadiness and concentration, there is simply a relaxing into the present moment. It may be that at times we even notice that the mind finds it's pretty nice to just stay in the present moment. It doesn't want to go somewhere else, whether into the past, into the story we've seen ten thousand times, or even into imagining. And there are moments—maybe they're brief—but there are moments when there's a taste of the preciousness of just that concentration, that steadiness of mind with what is. The mind simply doesn't need anything else than what it's offered.

So here we can say that concentration is just the opposite state of scatteredness or distractedness. There's no dispersion. And we can't make ourselves stay. You'll be surprised to hear that the proximate cause of concentration or steadiness of mind is happiness in the mind. It's gladness. When the mind is relaxed, then it's possible for it to stay, to be present.

So we don't force the focus away. What we do attend to—and you've probably got the secret by now—is we emphasize continuity of mindfulness, specifically here in this kind of practice. We can't strive for concentration because then we'd be really ambitious, but we do try to attend to the present moment with whatever it offers.

At times, as we've said, it's helpful to narrow the focus and bring the mind towards one type of experience—it could be the breath, or the body, the entire body, or just hearing. Both are valuable, and it's for us to know. There's no right or wrong here.

Ajahn Amaro explains this very well. He says people always ask, "Should I adopt this practice and be very strict, staying on one focus, or should I be more easygoing and go with the flow?" And he says, "If you set yourself a task to do, should you stick to it or should you just be ready to adapt to the condition?" That's a really valuable question.

The answer, he says, is that we love to have a formula to follow, a simple pattern that we can always obey that tells us we should be like this or do that. But in many ways, we need to be like a tree. A tree has both hardness, firmness, and it also has flexibility. If a tree had just firmness, then when the fierce wind blows, the tree would break. The branch would snap. If the tree has just flexibility and no rigidity at all, then it can't stand up. It has no resilience. It will bend too easily.

In the same way, our practice uses both these qualities—being firm and independent within ourselves, staying with that which we have committed ourselves to, and at the same time being ready to bend, to move and shift according to the time, place, and situation.

One can think that these qualities are conflicting, but they're not. Like in a tree, we don't think of the soft curves of a tall tree and the way it moves in the wind as being something disharmonious or ugly, do we? We don't see its hardness and softness fighting against each other. In the same way, that quality of stillness, of firmness, of steadiness of mind is also aligned with the flexibility of mind, of movement, of being able to take in experiences as they arise and pass away.

One truly needs to know is that worry or anxiety brings us out of the moment. And often we do worry about how much concentration we have and if we have enough. We always want more concentration. I've had this pattern for myself, thinking that concentration is really important because we want to be present. And worrying about it really didn't help my practice. I can tell you, if it is of any help for you, it will only do one thing—bring more tension, more tension to get it.

So it's quite the opposite. That ease and that spiral towards relaxation and allowing is what will be helpful in regard to that quality of mind. Continuity of mindfulness is what brings steadiness in the mind. Sometimes it's very helpful to narrow the focus and just attend for some time to one type of object, but to not stay there.

I've also seen in my practice how easily one can become attached to concentration because it's safe. Because, of course, the hindrances are at bay, at least some of them. And here in our vipassana practice we are working in the direction of uprooting the hindrances, not just enabling them to not be in the scenery, here in the landscape. And then we go out in the world and, oh, they're all back. That's not very good news.

So it's to understand that we're training the mind to head towards wisdom. That wisdom and freedom is the goal.

This is Ajahn Chah. He says, "Normally the untrained mind is full of worries and anxieties. So when a bit of concentration arises in practice, you easily become attached to it, mistaking states of tranquility for the end of meditation. Sometimes you may even think you have put an end to lust, greed, or hatred, only to be overwhelmed by them later on. Actually, it is worse to be caught in calmness than to be stuck in agitation, because at least you will want to escape from agitation, whereas you are content to remain in calmness and not go any further."

That's so true.

"When extraordinary, clear, blissful states arise from insight practice, do not cling to them. Although this tranquility has a sweet taste, it too must be seen as impermanent, unsatisfactory, and empty. Absorption is not what the Buddha found essential in his meditation. Practice without thought of attaining absorption or any special state. Just

know whether the mind is calm, concentrated or not. And if so, whether a little or a lot. In this way it will develop on its own. To concentrate is like turning on the switch, and wisdom is the resulting light. Without the switch, there is no light, but we should not waste our time playing with the switch. Likewise, concentration is the empty bowl, and wisdom is the food that fills it and makes the meal."

So you see how concentration and wisdom work hand in hand. Definitely an important factor of awakening—yet not the goal. Taking it for what it is. Practicing non-attachment, non-clinging in each moment.

And so here it's valuable to notice if there are preferences that we have in our practice. Notice now—you might have seen for all the hours that you're practicing—if you have attachments to certain mind states. We talked a lot about craving for sense pleasure, and that's one of the attachments. But we can also notice that attachment to meditative states or spiritual experiences is just another kind of attachment that we need to be aware of in our practice. Just be aware. That's all. Seeing them for what they are.

I have a little story. When I did my first long intensive retreat it was very hard. I think I said this. I was in Nepal for a month and the conditions were very difficult. And there was one day that I had some peace during a walking meditation. I was a sitter, and I did not like the walking as much as the sitting. And I was practicing in that one spot for the whole day. And I thought, okay, now I think I have a quality of practice in walking that is similar to sitting. And so I began really getting attached to my state.

But the next day, I went back to the walking practice and it was just awful. All this resistance arose—the mind was all over the place, didn't want to do it. And it was really difficult. I thought, where was that practice I had yesterday? And the thought arose: I better go back to that spot where I was practicing. Thinking that it was about the spot. It's just so fascinating how the mind can trick us in a way of sweet ignorance. Ignorance is bliss, as we say.

Sometimes humor helps in practice. I had a great insight in that moment—realizing that it wasn't about any condition, outer or inner. It was just really allowing the unpleasantness to be felt. It's so easy to get caught.

The third and last stabilizing factor is equanimity. So we have calm or tranquility, concentration or steadiness of mind, and equanimity.

There is a poem from one of the earliest Buddhist nuns. She says: "If your mind becomes firm like a rock and no longer shakes in a world where everything is shaking, your mind will be your greatest friend and suffering will not come your way."

Equanimity comes about as the result of all the previous qualities we've been discussing—one nourishing the other. It is this ability to be with whatever is presenting itself, whatever is emerging. A deep, deep quality of allowing. Whether it's pleasant or unpleasant is not relevant here.

And it's not that we don't feel anything. We feel. Whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, there's no doubt that sensations are still there. It's not that we've been knocked out. Simply, there is no reactivity in the mind. It's just: oh, unpleasant feels like this. And the mind is pliable, flexible, steady, calm, and can just meet that experience as it shows itself. Unpleasant feels like this. So we don't grasp and don't push away, allowing the change and flow of experience to come and go. It's the result of a balanced mind—quite an extraordinary quality.

We've all had moments of this quality. You may think, oh, I don't know that quality of mind. And yes, there are moments when we're just with what is and we're allowing things to be just the way they are. There's the cessation of reactivity. The conditions are just right.

An image used to illustrate the quality of equanimity is that of a mountain. You know how the mountain sits and receives the sunshine. The rain falls on the mountain, it may get covered with snow, or it may be struck by lightning—all these different qualities that manifest. Whatever happens to that mountain, it just remains unwavering. There's that quality of unwavering. It doesn't waver.

Equanimity is the ground for freedom through wisdom. As a factor of awakening, it has a function. That function is to fill up where there is a lack and to reduce where there is excess, so we don't fall into the extremes of reactivity, whether it's for or against. Equanimity holds the hand of mindfulness, you can say. It rests the mind before it falls into liking and disliking. That's the quality.

What great power of mind—to experience that through all experiences, whatever we're mindful of, whether it's a painful sensation or a felt sense experience, tasting, touching, or a thought, there's that clear possibility of not getting caught. It's this quality that gives us greater strength of heart to stay in the process. Just stay present.

And it's also that quality that enables us to notice: oh, there's greater ease here. We understand more and more how the workings of the mind unfold, how grasping causes suffering, how opening to grasping when it is there just releases the suffering, how we can let go of our attachments to the various aspects of ourselves.

And we remember: when that quality is present, it's truly possible then that we notice—this is not ours. Whatever it is, it's not my pain.

It's not my thought. It's just a thought. It's just natural phenomena emerging. So there isn't a grasping to I, me, or mine there.

The Buddha was once asked, what is the distance between suffering and the end of suffering? Is there, are they far away from one another, suffering and non-suffering? And he says the distance can be traversed in the blink of an eye. That's quite an image, isn't it? Just the blink of an eye and—end of suffering. Back into suffering. And we go through these movements.

So notice in your practice how you can help yourself with these factors of awakening, simply by beginning to see at times, noticing if they are present in your practice. Being mindful of mindfulness—is mindfulness present? Is investigation present? Energy? Joy? Tranquility? Calm? Steadiness of mind or concentration? Equanimity? It will help support the practice. And here again, it's not to make them happen. They naturally will arise with the continuity of mindfulness. If we dedicate ourselves to the practice, very naturally there's a deepening and a strengthening of these qualities. As these qualities are strengthening, there is a reduction of the hindrances. So to notice in our heart and mind if there's a possibility of seeing these emerge.

I know that for myself, it has been truly helpful to review at times which of these seven factors is weak. We each have one, two, three maybe, that are weaker than others because we have different tendencies. If we're someone with a lot of energy, then energy will be present and maybe not calm or stillness. If we're a quiet person and very calm, maybe there needs to be a little more energy offered to our practice. And to do this without judgment, but really with the force of interest.

Now these factors of awakening are also maturing in our daily life. It's impressive to see that—you may think, oh, I have to be on a three-month course or six-week course to have the factors of awakening emerge. And it's not so. They are qualities that can be totally integrated in our daily life. And that's quite extraordinary.

To end, I'll read a teaching that was offered from the great Thai master Ajahn Buddhadasa, who taught the factors of awakening to farmers in his village. It's called "Plowing Your Fields with the Factors of Awakening."

Much of Ajahn Buddhadasa's teaching involved applying the teachings to ordinary life. His thesis was that the point of being a Buddhist is to live without suffering—and not just out in some cave or on a meditation retreat or in the monastery, but in the midst of whatever we're doing. The way to live without suffering is to transform whatever we're doing, whether plowing the rice fields, brushing your teeth, or doing the dishes, into a practice of the path.

He was grounded in his environment, so he would often talk about the seven factors of awakening in very colloquial terms. During his lifetime, the Thai farmers in the neighborhood of Suan Mok Monastery were still using water buffaloes for plowing their fields. They hardly do that anymore due to economic changes, and there's not much rice farming there anymore. But it was different in the old days.

He would say to the villagers, for a farmer to plow his fields, he needs to use the seven factors of awakening. First of all, you have to be very aware of what you're doing. You have to be mindful of your buffalo, and you have to be mindful of the plow. If the plow goes too deep, it gets stuck. If it's too shallow, it doesn't do any good. You have to be mindful of where you turn, of what signals you are giving the buffalo, and a host of other factors. And not only mindful, but you need to be constantly investigating while you are plowing the field with the water buffalo. The mind has to be alert in checking things out as you go, examining the quality of the soil, the level of moisture, the state of the buffalo, the location of obstacles.

You have to be learning in the process. You have to put energy into it, both physical and mental energy. Without energy, you may space out and get lax. If your buffalo is a good one, he may just keep going for a while. But some buffaloes are naughty—as are horses and mules—and if they discern any slackness in your hold, they'll take advantage of it.

You also need a certain amount of satisfaction in what you're doing. Whether we're plowing a field or practicing meditation, anything can become boring or burdensome if we don't find satisfaction in it. Or it can be fun, in a dharmic sense—interesting, rewarding. We're better able to pursue what we find satisfying in a wholesome way.

And this satisfaction will bring with it a state of calm. If we're plowing our field but we're agitated physically, we'll annoy or startle the buffalo. If our mind is agitated, it will interfere with some of the other factors. It's easier to be present, whether plowing the field or doing meditation practice, when we are calm.

When the mind settles down, it naturally becomes more focused. The forces that agitate and distract the mind become eliminated, and it is easier for the mind to remain settled upon a single task. Both the farmer and the buffalo need to be undistracted if the field is to get plowed before dark.

When all these factors are present and they mutually reinforce one another, the mind gains the ability to simply watch over and keep things on track. The effort becomes effortless, so to speak. Equanimity is like that. When you're completely in balance and yet you have some momentum, you don't make mistakes and the work just appears to move forward on its own.

This is how the seven factors of awakening can work together to turn any activity of daily life into a rewarding practice of progressing on the path of awakening.

May the seven factors of awakening emerge and support your practice. And may all the good energies and fruits of your practice be for the well-being and happiness of all beings everywhere.

CHAPTER 20

The Gratification, The Danger, and The Escape

Rebecca Bradshaw · 58 min

> *In this sutta study talk, Rebecca Bradshaw guides practitioners through a profound teaching from the Saṃyutta Nikāya on the six sense bases (saḷāyatana). The Buddha's framework of gratification, danger, and escape offers another presentation of the core truths of existence: sense contact brings genuine pleasure, yet attachment to impermanent experiences inevitably leads to dukkha.*
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> *Bradshaw begins with the Sabba Sutta, establishing that 'the all' consists only of the six sense bases and their objects—eye and forms, ear and sounds, nose and odors, tongue and tastes, body and tactile objects, mind and mental phenomena. She then explores how the Buddha acknowledged the real gratification in sense pleasures while clearly seeing their limitation: everything conditioned is impermanent (anicca), suffering, and subject to change. Using vivid examples—from brownies to teacups to the sounds of carpentry versus waterfalls—she illustrates how craving and aversion bind us like shackles.*
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> *The escape lies not in rejecting sense experience but in abandoning craving through direct knowing. Drawing on teachers including Ajahn Chāh, Charlotte Joko Beck, and Shundō Aoyama, Bradshaw emphasizes that mindfulness allows us to observe our conditioning without identification, letting attachments 'quietly and imperceptibly wither away.' The talk concludes with the recognition that true happiness is peace—a mind free from the addiction to pleasure, touching freedom in each moment of non-clinging.*

Tonight's talk is titled "The Gratification, the Danger, and the Escape."

Tonight we're going to do a little bit of sutra study. The Buddha gave extensive discourses through his forty-odd years of teaching, and these discourses were committed to writing five hundred years after his death. For the first five hundred years, they were carried on through an oral tradition. When you read the sutras, they're often very repetitious—it's one way that things were remembered. I'm going to read several short sutras that are linked. I'll abbreviate some of the repetition, but I'll include some because it's also helpful for us in remembering ourselves. Then I'll talk about or explain these sutras in a little more detail.

First, I'd like to set the stage a little bit. The Buddha is sometimes called a scientist of the mind. In his teachings, he gave great detail about how the mind works and what the nature of this reality is. He talked often about what is called conditioned reality—the world as we know it, as we can directly experience it.

When the Buddha talked about conditioned reality, he broke it down in many different ways. One way we've already heard about is the five aggregates: form, feeling, perceptions, volitional formations, and consciousness. That's one way we can understand how the world is put together. In the sutra I'm going to be reading, he's explaining reality through the six sense bases and the six sense objects.

This is a little pre-sutra. It's not the one we're going to be studying mostly tonight. It's called the All Sutra:

Bhikkhus, I will teach you the all. Listen to that. And what, bhikkhus, is the all? The eye and forms, the ear and sounds, the nose and odors, the tongue and tastes, the body and tactile objects, the mind and mental phenomena. This is called the all. If anyone, bhikkhu, should speak thus: "Having rejected this all, I shall make known another all," that would be a mere empty boast on his part. If he were questioned, he would not be able to reply, and further he would meet with vexation.

This is one way of describing the all. All that we can experience is the six sense bases and the six sense objects. The mind, when we talk about the mind and mental objects, includes thoughts and emotions, other mind states such as restlessness, concentration, and sleepiness, other factors of mind such as perception, recognition, intention, and consciousness—the knowing faculty of the mind. Can you find anything else besides these six sense bases and six sense objects?

Given that this is the all, the Buddha, in the sutra from the Book of the Six Sense Bases in the Samyutta Nikaya, the Connected Discourses of the Buddha, talks about how we can relate to our experience of the six sense bases and six sense objects in a way that brings happiness and peace.

I'm going to read the sutra first:

At Savatthi. Bhikkhus—monks, we'll just say serious practitioners—before my enlightenment, while I was still a bodhisattva, not yet fully enlightened, it occurred to me: What is the gratification? What is the danger? What is the escape in the case of the eye? What is the gratification? What is the danger? What is the escape in the case of the ear? What is the gratification? What is the danger? What is the escape in the case of the tongue, the body, the mind?

Then it occurred to me: The pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on the eye—this is the gratification in the eye. That the eye is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change—this is the danger in the eye. The removal and abandonment of desire and lust for the eye—this is the escape from the eye.

The pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on the ear—this is the gratification in the ear. That the ear is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change—this is the danger in the ear. The removal and abandonment of desire and lust for the ear—this is the escape from the ear.

And so on. The joy and pleasure that arise in dependence on the nose, the tongue, the body, the mind—this is the gratification in the six sense bases.

That the six sense bases are impermanent, suffering, and subject to change—this is the danger in the sense bases. The removal and abandonment of desire and lust for the sense bases—this is the escape from the sense bases.

"So long as I did not know as they really are the gratification, the danger, and the escape in the case of the six sense bases, I did not claim to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world. But when I directly knew all of this as it really is, then I claimed to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world."

These short connected suttas are another form of presenting the three noble truths, another way of presenting an understanding of reality leading to freedom. The question in this sutta is: How are we to relate to our experience, our lives through the senses, in a way that develops understanding leading to peace?

Let's take the three parts. We'll start with the gratification: "The pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on the eye—this is the gratification in the eye."

So we have the six sense bases, and by extrapolation, the six sense objects: visual objects, sounds, odors, tastes, tactile sensations, and mind objects. In Buddhist psychology, the sense base plus the sense object plus the sense consciousness equals a moment of contact. We have the eye, we have visual forms, and we have eye consciousness. They come together, and that's what we call experience. Basically, this sutta is saying at the beginning that sense contact can be pleasurable—it can produce joy. Now, this isn't news to you. Because of this, there is some sense of gratification in sense contact.

This is a kind of happiness we're all familiar with, a kind of happiness we can experience associated with sense pleasures. We see the colorful fall leaves and feel a certain happiness. We drink a warm cup of tea and feel a certain happiness. The warm breeze

touches our face, and the pleasure produces some kind of happiness in our minds. This kind of happiness is readily available if we pay attention. Many moments of our day we can experience this kind of happiness if we're present to notice the beauty and the pleasure in this world.

Meditation actually helps us access this kind of happiness by training us how to be present, teaching us how to connect with our senses. That's basically what we do all day here—we learn how to bring our attention back over and over again to being present through some sense experience, whether the experience of hearing, seeing, smelling, or the mind.

As we're here for a longer period of time, we find that meditation opens up our senses. As the mind becomes purified, there's less clutter, and we're more able to enjoy the simple pleasures of life—the many-layered smell of the fall air, the brightness of the leaves, the sound of gentle rain falling. We're more able to be here for these experiences rather than being scattered and inattentive. We find that our senses become more sensitive, more refined. We can appreciate subtlety: the richness of the bell tones, the richness of one mouthful of rice, the different flavors from the beginning of the mouthful to the end. Some of you may be finding that your senses have become more refined than you would actually like them to be—sounds can seem louder, for example.

So the Buddha did recognize that experiences can bring us some level of happiness, that sense pleasures can bring us some joy, some comfort, some gratification. Raised as a prince, he knew about this in the extreme. It's said that he was raised in a fairly wealthy home and had many sense pleasures available to him—many comforts, a life of extreme comfort. This is really the conventional understanding of happiness in this world. Most people, when they think of happiness, this is what they're thinking about.

But the Buddha saw that this didn't solve the problem of human existence. Even though he had the extreme of comfort and sense pleasures, he determined that this wasn't the answer to this conundrum of how we find true happiness in this world. So we're going to have to look a little deeper. We can't just leave the subject there.

The Buddha continues in the next part: "Bhikkhus, I set out seeking the gratification in the eye, the ear, the six sense bases. Whatever gratification there is in the six sense bases, that I have discovered. I have clearly seen with wisdom how far the gratification in the six sense bases extends."

We start to get a sense that there is some limit to the kind of happiness we can have through sense pleasures—that there's some gratification in sense pleasures, but it only extends so far. The Buddha said that he had seen how far this gratification extends.

So he goes on further to explain where the problem lies. He says: "Bhikkhus, if there were no gratification in the eye and the other sense bases, beings would not become enamored with them. But because there is gratification in the eye and the other sense bases, beings become enamored with them."

Because there is pleasantness and gratification, we become enamored and attached. We fall in love with sense pleasures.

I think it's interesting that the word here is "enamored." It has a kind of mindless sense to it, a sense of getting lost in it. Like when we're in love, infatuated, we're rather blind. We see the good and we completely ignore or don't even see the faults. We don't even want to hear about the faults. Have you ever tried to tell someone in love that the person they love has faults and limitations? It's hopeless. We don't want our bubble burst. That's what being enamored does to us. We become entranced.

This blindness around sense pleasures is encouraged by Western society, and I think particularly American society. As an American, that's my sense—we worship sense gratification. Ajahn Sumedho said, "I was brought up in America, the land of freedom. It promises the right to be happy, but what it really offers is the right to become attached to everything." America encourages you to try to be as happy as you can by getting things. It seems like we've raised sense gratification to an art form in this country. And I also think it's based on our economic system that runs on encouraging sense pleasures and sense gratifications.

So we're all deeply conditioned—both internally through deeply rooted tendencies of mind, and externally through our economic system and our society—to seek this gratification of sense pleasures.

So maybe you want to stay infatuated with sense pleasures. Maybe you don't want to hear the rest of this sutta. But when we tell that infatuated person of the danger, they would usually avoid a lot of pain and suffering if they listened to us, no? So maybe we should continue with the Buddha's discourse and see what he would like to warn us about.

Another way we can think of this investigation into the dangers of the six sense bases is that it's about developing a mature love for this world. When we're enamored or infatuated with the sense pleasures of this world, we're not completely in touch with reality. We see only part of the truth and we avoid the whole story. But a mature love must see both the beauty and the limitations of the other, of this world. A mature love sees and accepts things as they are. This is a stronger and more enduring love than infatuation.

So as we look at the limitations of the gratification of the things of this world, perhaps our love of life as we experience it can become more mature.

The next part of the sutta asks: What is the danger of the six sense bases? What is the limitation that the Buddha saw?

"That the eye is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change. This is the danger in the eye. That the ear is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change. This is the danger in the ear." And so forth with the six sense bases. "That the mind is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change. This is the danger in the mind."

One of the basic truths about life and the core teachings of the Buddha that you've been hearing about in recent weeks is that conditions in this world are constantly changing. Anicca—impermanence. All that we can experience through the senses is fleeting.

When we're enamored of sense pleasures and they change, as they inevitably will, how do we feel? We try to hold on, and that very state of holding on is contraction and suffering. And we can't hold on to anything. Life is a flowing river and you can't stop the stream.

The constant flow of change in this world is described very beautifully in a book called *Zen Seeds: Reflections of a Female Priest*, written by a lovely Japanese nun named Shundo Oyama. In a chapter called "Hearing the Voice of the Valley Stream," she writes:

"The water of the valley stream is always flowing. It races on and on, not pausing for even an instant. Its sound to me is the sound of time. The water of time glistens on the riverbed of the universe. Though theirs is a much slower flow, stones, trees, houses, and towns are flowing too. Human beings and all things that have life flow. Thought and culture too flow."

That all these appear to be unchanging is an illusion. When we listen subconsciously to the sound of flowing water, does it not seem to create a rhythm? Yet not a single drop of water passes over the same rock twice, and the murmur of water rushing over a rock is constantly changing. Sameness is but an illusion of human ears, eyes, and mind. Water that has once flowed along a riverbed can never retrace its course. Human life is no different. It is only our mundane eyes and minds that see yesterday as being the same as today. Enlightened eyes and minds should recognize that each moment has a form different than that of any other moment. What is there that we can hold on to? It runs through our hands.

I'm sure you've been seeing this here over these weeks, over and over again. Just watch your mind. Does it stay the same from one moment to the next? Watch the day unfold. Watch your body closely and notice it changing.

Here's a little Suzuki Roshi quote. A student said during the question and answer time following a lecture, "Suzuki Roshi, I've been listening to your lectures for years, but I just don't understand. Could you just please put it in a nutshell? Can you reduce Buddhism to one phrase?" Everyone laughed. Suzuki laughed. "Everything changes," he said. Then he asked for another question.

I lead a meditation group at a college nearby, Mount Holyoke College, and one week I was talking with the students about change, about this being the basic truth we need to understand in Buddhism. I said, "Okay, everything changes—so what? Why is that so important? So what?" And one of the young women answered in a way that I enjoyed. She said, "Because that's pretty much the way things are, and if you have issues with this, you need to deal with them."

I think we all have issues with this, and that's what we're doing here. We're dealing with them.

So we know that everything changes. The world is in constant flux. But it's our most basic delusion to hide from this fact. We really don't want to see it. When we look, it seems pretty obvious, right? But we need to see and accept anicca, impermanence, change, deeply if we're going to have peace of mind in this world, if we're going to live in harmony with the way things are, if we're going to love this world with wisdom. We need to see it happen moment after moment after moment.

Uchiyama Roshi, a Zen master, described practice as active participation in loss. How do we deal with this constant loss of impermanence, of change? It takes strength to explore this. The rewards, however, are great. The Buddha said seeing this is the way to liberation. In Chapter 20 of the Dhammapada, he says, "Everything changes, nothing stays the same. Having gained this awareness, one is freed from suffering. This is the way of purification. All conditioned things are subject to change. Having fully learned this insight, one is freed from suffering. This is the way of purification."

As long as we don't see clearly this truth of impermanence, of constant change, as long as we don't experience it deeply with mindfulness, we will believe that we can find happiness through holding on to pleasant sense experience—by increasing pleasant experiences and decreasing unpleasant experiences—and we'll expend our energy resisting life. We'll take refuge in trying to control life and get caught in this dangerous place.

This struggle is the suffering of attachment. It's a state of contraction, of control, of restlessness. It's really a fight against life as it is, against the truth, the truth of anicca. It's obviously not a state of peace.

The late Ajahn Chah, meditation master in the Thai forest tradition that we've mentioned several times, describes the state one lives in when there's an inability to accept the flow of change.

He uses the image of a river again. "It's like the water of a river," he says. "It naturally flows down the gradient. It never flows against it. That's its nature. If a person was to go and stand on a river bank and seeing the water flowing swiftly down its course, foolishly want it to flow back up the gradient, he or she would suffer. Whatever he was doing, his wrong thinking would allow him no peace of mind. He would be unhappy because of his wrong view, thinking against his dreams. If he had right view, he would see that the water must inevitably flow down the gradient. And until he realized and accepted that fact, the man or woman would be agitated and upset."

Kind of like us. We're agitated and upset because we don't understand and accept the way life flows. Our attempts to control the world can bring some temporary gratification, but ultimately this is going to fail as a strategy for happiness and peace because everything changes and we can't stop this flow of the river of change. We can't make pleasantness stay. One sitting you feel great, the next you're restless. You eat lunch, and it's great, and then it's gone.

I remember my first retreat here, every morning thinking about lunch. You know how it gets limited, what's happening around here, so thoughts about lunch can become rather important. I'm not saying I spent all morning thinking about lunch, but it was certainly somewhere I would go when I needed somewhere to go in my mind. And so I'd think about lunch all morning, and I'd go to lunch, and I'd eat lunch mindfully. And then at the end of lunch, I would look down at the plate and think, what was that all about? It's gone. Lunch is gone. And I did it day after day. It was amazing.

So our attempts to hold on to pleasantness come up empty and bring agitation and restlessness. Here's another story from an Ajahn Chah book:

The previous Sangha Raja, the supreme patriarch of the monastic order of Thailand, once went on a tour of China where someone offered him a very beautiful teacup. It was unlike anything he'd ever seen. He thought, "Oh, the people here have real faith in me to offer me this beautiful teacup." And as soon as the teacup was in his hand, immediately he was suffering. Where should I put it? Where is the safe place to keep it? He couldn't stop worrying it would break. Before he had that teacup, he was fine. Once he

had it, he wanted to show it off to the people back home in Thailand. He put it in his bag and kept telling everyone to watch out that the teacup didn't get broken. "Hey, careful, please." Everywhere he was watching out for it. He had nothing but suffering. Before, this suffering didn't exist, but now there was this heaviness of having the teacup.

So he boarded his plane back to Thailand. When he arrived, he warned the novices, "Be careful, don't let the teacup break." You lay people, watch out. There's something fragile here. This went on all the time, suffering because of attachment to the cup. Finally, one day, a long time later, a novice picked it up and it slipped from his hand and broke. What relief the Sangharaja felt. "Ah, I am free!" Suffering all those years.

In his typical manner, the Buddha set up the problem very clearly. The danger is that we become attached to sense pleasures because of the gratification they bring, but they're impermanent, not reliable, always changing, and we suffer when we try to hold on. Now he goes about telling us how to resolve the problem: "The removal and abandonment of desire and lust for the eye, this is the escape from the eye. The removal and abandonment of desire and lust for the ear, this is the escape from the ear. The removal and abandonment of desire and lust for the six sense bases, this is the escape from the six sense bases."

I think it's interesting that the word "escape" has been chosen. Escape implies that we are caught and we get free. This is interesting because craving has been described as shackles in the heart.

Craving binds the heart, clenches it like a fist. It's like living in a dark prison. And we don't see this when we are enamored with sense pleasures. We're shackled and imprisoned by our own craving.

As you know, a corollary of attachment is aversion. It's a flip side of attachment, but they're both rooted in an inability to accept things as they are—impermanent, suffering, and subject to change. One craves to obtain and keep that which is pleasant. The other tries to get rid of that which is unpleasant. These are two control strategies that we use to try to manage the world so that it will be comfortable for us, pleasant for us. It's an exhausting and hopeless task. There's no rest with this task.

So the way out of our predicament is by abandoning our craving and our attachment for the sense bases and sense objects or sense pleasure. Now he doesn't say we have to get rid of sense bases or the corresponding pleasure. He doesn't even say that we shouldn't enjoy sense pleasure. But we do need to work with our attachment if we want

to be free. We can understand this on a couple different levels. We can understand it on the level of craving for sense objects, for sense experience. And we can understand it on the level of the creation and attachment to self, which is part of this craving.

So how are we to do this? How are we to deal with craving and aversion? How do we abandon them? The rest of the sutta gives us some hints:

As long as I did not directly know as they really are the gratification, the danger, and the escape of these six sense bases, I did not claim to have awakened. But when I knew directly all this as it really is, then I claimed to have awakened.

To know directly is to experience for ourselves. So we pay attention to how we respond to our experiences through the sense doors. We pay attention to pleasant and unpleasant experiences and how we react to them. Not to have someone explain it to us, not to have an intellectual understanding, but to see for ourselves. And the only place we have to see is in our own experience.

Several years ago when I was in Burma—and I want you to know when I tell Burma stories, I sometimes talk about some of the challenges of Burma. I just want to clarify from the start that Burma is a great place to practice. Just so you know that. So I had, as I mentioned in one of my previous talks, a little kuti on a ridge, a little hut on a ridge. And on one side of the ridge there was first one carpentry project going on and then another one. So there was sawing and hammering, not too many electrical tools, but occasional electrical tools, and basically sounds that I didn't find very pleasant. On the other side of this ridge was the cistern where the water was pumped up from the river and pumped into this big cistern. And so it sounded like a waterfall, the water falling into this big pool or reservoir.

I had so much fun sitting in front of my kuti, noticing what I did with these two different experiences. I've learned a lot working with sounds. It's one of the places where I can get caught. So I would notice the carpentry sounds. I would notice unpleasantness. I would notice aversion when it would arise. And then on the other hand, I would notice the sound of the waterfall, and I would notice the pleasant and craving when it would arise. And then I would notice also when I could just hear the carpentry sounds—unpleasant, but there was no problem. Or when I would hear the sound of the waterfall—just pleasant, but no craving.

So I just got to explore: what does the mind do with unpleasant and with pleasant sense contact? What's it like when we're mindless? What's it like when we're mindful? This is the kind of exploration that we get to do. And this is how we see directly for ourselves the gratification, the danger, the escape.

So we use the tool of mindfulness in our investigation. Being with our direct experience—what is our direct experience of the senses? Do we see how they change? Do we experience their arising and passing away?

Do we notice if craving and aversion arise? What does that feel like in the body or the mind? How substantial is our desire, our craving, and our aversion? What happens when we turn mindfulness to it? This is the kind of exploration we're doing. How seductive is it?

A few months ago, I was teaching a retreat with Patricia at West, and we had some really great brownies. She remembers this. We had these great brownies. I love brownies. Chocolate—anything chocolate, I love chocolate. So we had these great Ghirardelli, however you say it, really good chocolate brownies.

One night they were out after dinner, and I didn't want to have one at that time of the evening because I was afraid I wouldn't sleep. But I did want my brownie, so I wrapped it up and took it back to my little cabin to save. When I got to the cabin, I thought, well, maybe I'll just have one bite. Eventually, I ate the whole brownie. Afterwards, I thought, wow, I've been bested by a brownie. I was just kind of fascinated that craving for a brownie could overcome my resolve not to eat it.

So the next night, there were still some brownies. I said, okay, this time the brownie is not going to win. I wrapped up a brownie, brought it back, and I just watched my mind want this brownie. Just a bite, you know? And I didn't eat it. I saved it for the next day. I was fascinated by that exploration and also by the feeling of power of not having the brownie win the second time around.

There is a certain strength that we learn when we don't have to be run around by craving, when we're not addicted to craving. But as you can see from the story, we really just want to investigate. I didn't beat myself up for the brownie winning the first round. I was just interested. I thought, wow, that's pretty fascinating.

We grow in wisdom as we do these kinds of explorations. A retreat is an excellent opportunity because there aren't as many ways to escape the wanting and the aversive mind, so we get to sit down and look at it. Charlotte Joko Beck called retreat "controlled suffering." Thomas Merton said, "Those who are drawn to solitude don't suffer less, but suffer more effectively."

That's what we're trying to do here—suffer effectively, which means learn. Learn from our suffering.

We do this investigation with mindfulness. We observe our conditioning. We notice our crazy monkey mind grasping at pleasantness, pushing away unpleasantness. We watch how we get ensnared. We watch how the brownie wins. And then mindfulness is our protection. We see that if we pay attention, sometimes the brownie doesn't win. We start to be able to see through our attachments and our aversions.

Don't underestimate the simple power of observing—seeing that you don't have to obey every whim of your mind. You don't have to believe every story your mind tells you. Seeing that it comes and goes on its own. It's not me or mine. This way we develop wisdom.

Today I was looking at a Shambhala Sun publication, and there was something that Leonard Cohen, the singer-songwriter—he spent a number of years in seclusion with a Zen master—was talking about meditation. I just want to read a paragraph. It kind of fits in, but not totally, but I loved it so much.

He said, "What happens in meditations that last ten, fifteen hours"—like you guys, a typical day—"is that you run through your top ten erotic fantasies, ambition fantasies, revenge fantasies, global ratification fantasies. You run through them all until you bore yourself to death, basically. And the faculty that produces opinions and snap judgments and unrealistic scenarios for your own prominence, after you run through them for a number of years, they cease to have charge. They bore themselves into nonexistence."

It's true. We almost have to get bored of this pattern of conditioning, going through it over and over and over again.

In this part of the sutra, the Buddha spoke of the abandonment of lust. Lust is our desire, our craving—not just sexual lust, but in a greater sense, lust for sense pleasures. To abandon means to leave aside. It doesn't mean we have to get angry about our desire or craving, or get mad at it, or make it bad, or reject it. Simply leaving it aside, learning over time not to get caught in it.

Charlotte Joko Beck says, "We never lose an attachment by saying it has to go. Only as we gain awareness of its true nature does it quietly and imperceptibly wither away, like a sandcastle with waves rolling over." It just moves out, and finally—where is it? What was it?

So we look at the nature of attachment. It's like poking holes in a piece of fabric, as I mentioned in another talk. We poke holes in the fabric of craving, and eventually we can see through it. We start to see that we don't have to identify with our reactivity, that

it arises because of conditions and passes away when those conditions change. We don't have to take it so personally. And then our attachments become more transparent and lose their power to seduce us.

At Savatthi, early one morning, Alavika the nun put on her robes and, taking her bowl and outer robe, went into Savatthi for alms. When she had gone for alms and returned from her alms round after her meal, she went to the Grove of the Blind to spend the day. Having gone deep into the grove, she sat down at the foot of a tree for the day's abiding.

Then Mara—our friend Mara—wanting to arouse fear, horripilation, and terror in her, wanting to make her fall away from seclusion, approached her and addressed her in verse: "There's no escape in the world. There's no escape in the world. So what are you trying to do with solitude? Enjoy sensual delights. Don't be someone who later regrets."

Then the thought occurred to Alavika the nun, "Now who has recited this verse, a human being or a non-human one?" Then it occurred to her, "This is Mara who has recited this verse, wanting to arouse fear, horripilation, and terror in me, wanting to make me fall away from seclusion."

Then, having understood that this is Mara, she replied to him in verse: "There is an escape in the world, well touched by me with discernment—something that you, evil one, don't know. Sensual pleasures are like swords and spears, the aggregates their executioner's block. What you call sensual delight is no delight for me."

Then Mara, sad and dejected at realizing Alavika the nun knows him, vanished right there.

We just need to recognize Mara when Mara appears in the form of attachment, aversion, craving, ignorance. Obviously, this isn't a small task or a necessarily easy one. You tell people you're going for three months to observe the reactivity of your mind, and most of them aren't going to jump up and down begging you to bring them along. But that's because they don't see that this is the way to become more spacious and peaceful and ultimately free.

We see our reactivity towards our sense experience, our clinging and identification with sense experience, including the mind. And we also see the freedom from nonclinging to any of it as me or mine. The Buddha called this the way to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world.

There's a beautiful chant that sums up this understanding: "All conditioned things are impermanent. Their nature is to arise and pass away. Understanding this brings the greatest kind of happiness, which is peace."

As we meditate more, we discover that the joy and happiness we conventionally think of are actually somewhat gross in texture. We begin to see that a mind at peace is the happiest kind of mind, as the Buddha said. A mind that is free, free of clinging, free of our addiction to pleasure—this is the happiest kind of mind. And we have to learn this over and over.

Another quote by my favorite teacher, Charlotte Joko Beck: "Practice has to be a process of endless disappointment. We have to see that everything we demand, and even get, eventually disappoints us. This discovery is our teacher."

Trungpa Rinpoche said, "Disappointment is a good sign of basic intelligence. It cannot be compared to anything else. It is so sharp, precise, obvious, and direct."

It's like lunch every day. I had to see day after day after day that lunch wasn't going to do it. That wasn't what was going to make me happy.

Every moment of non-clinging is a moment of freedom.

In the Shorter Discourse on the Destruction of Craving, the Buddha preaches to a deva who wants to know how, in brief, a bhikkhu is liberated. And the Buddha says: the bhikkhu becomes learned, learning that nothing is suitable to settle in. He becomes learned, learning all things thoroughly and accurately, recognizing all things. When a bhikkhu sees, abides seeing that nothing is worth adhering to, he directly knows everything. Whatever feeling he feels, whether pleasant or painful, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant, he abides contemplating impermanence in these feelings. Contemplating thus, he does not cling to anything in this world. When he does not cling, he is not agitated. When he is not agitated, he personally attains nibbana.

So in our investigation, we circle back to the world of our senses, the world as we experience it, and we explore how we relate to this world and the pleasures it provides. Our love for the world matures as we learn to accept inevitable change, as we understand the limitations of sense pleasures. We learn that we can experience life with an open hand rather than a clenched fist. We have tastes of a mind that is free of the shackles of craving. We know directly, as they really are, the gratification, the danger, and the escape in the case of this world of our senses.

I'd like to end with a poem from Han Shan, a Chinese hermit poet—one of his Cold Mountain Poems. Cold Mountain is a place of happiness beyond conditions, beyond addiction to pleasure. And the six doors in this poem, I think you can guess what they are:

Cold mountain is a house without beams or walls.
The six doors left and right are open.
The hall is blue sky.
The rooms are all vacant and vague.
The east wall beats on the west wall.
At the center, nothing.

Borrowers don't bother me.
In the cold, I build a little fire.
When I'm hungry, I boil up some greens.
I've got no use for the kulak with his big barn and pasture.
He just sets up a prison for himself.
Once in, he can't get out.

Think it over.
You know it might happen to you.

CHAPTER 21

Feeling Tone (Vedanā)

Pascal Auclair · 52 min

> *In this talk from the 2007 Three-Month Retreat at IMS, Pascal Auclair offers a comprehensive exploration of vedanā (feeling tone), one of the five khandhas and a foundation of mindfulness in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Building on the previous day's teaching about sense pleasure, he examines how every contact with the world produces feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—and how these feelings become the basis for our habitual reactions of passion, resistance, and ignorance.*
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> *Auclair draws extensively from the Cūḷavedalla Sutta, featuring the profound dialogue between the arahant nun Dhammadīnā and her former husband Visākha. A key insight emerges: neutral feeling, when unnoticed, manifests as subtle unpleasantness or boredom, but when met with clear awareness, becomes pleasant. This understanding reveals why peace is an acquired taste and illuminates our addiction to intensity. The talk also explores the Buddha's six-fold classification of feelings into worldly and unworldly categories, connecting unworldly pleasant feelings to the pāramīs and the practice of renunciation.*
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> *Particularly valuable is the examination of how feeling tone shapes our views and opinions—a humbling investigation into whether our beliefs stem from reason or simply from what feels pleasant or unpleasant. Auclair encourages practitioners to apply the Four Noble Truths to their viewpoints, asking whether they lead toward tranquility and liberation. The simplicity of the practice is emphasized: just knowing 'pleasant feeling,' 'unpleasant feeling,' 'neutral feeling' as they arise, witnessing their rapid impermanence as a direct path to freedom.*

I'm actually going to try to give a serious dharma talk tonight. I want to build on what Rebecca talked about yesterday—the gratification, the danger, and the escape of sense pleasure. But the way I'd like to look at it is from the angle of feeling tone.

Feeling tone has been mentioned a lot in the last few weeks in the morning questions, and there hasn't been a talk given on the subject, but it's kind of there almost all the time. It's somewhere around the questions—for me anyway. I could feel it a lot of the time.

The Buddha said all things converge on feelings. So what are feelings? Just so we're on the same page: the feeling tone in Buddhism is something very precise. It's not an intuition, like when I have a feeling. It's not a touch, like when I feel something. It's this very precise thing that comes out of contact with the world.

I find myself here. I'm not quite sure why. But I know that I know what's going on. There is consciousness. There is mind and matter. There is body and mind. There are six senses. And with these senses, I contact the world. I'm impacted by the world. This contact between, let's say, the eye and light and form is almost like a pressing—something that presses. And the juice that comes out is what we would call the feeling tone.

It's either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—neither pleasant nor unpleasant. So it's always presented like this: three categories. But the reality of experience is a whole range. We know when something is slightly irritating versus when something is clearly unbearable. On the other end, we know when something is quite nice and then when something is really nice. That's the whole range. And then there's the in-between.

It's also both mental and physical. On the body, it's experienced as pain or pleasure. In the mind, we could say it's rather pleasant or unpleasant.

I've read different teachings around this. Somewhere I read that only touch, the physical sense, can experience pain and pleasure—that sight, sound, taste, and smell don't have inherently in them pain or pleasure. It's more what we make of them, the perception. For example, a dog sees a bone. I see a bone. The experience of pleasant and unpleasant might be extremely different. I see a Picasso painting. A dog sees a Picasso painting. So you can see that it's not in the object itself. It's in the encounter of the outside world with the inside world, pressing one against another, and then there's a juice that comes out. That is the feeling tone.

In the teachings, Myoshin, I think, last week talked about the feeling tone because it's one of the five aggregates—one of the five rivers of what makes a human being. There's a river of feelings constantly. This arises with each experience. It's relentless. There is never a moment where there is no feeling. It might be hard to catch sometimes because of the neutrality of the feeling tone, but it's there all the time. It's a stream, a river. One of the rivers of being human is the feeling tone, constantly. Torture, pleasure, irritation—all the range is constantly happening.

And so let's talk about Dhammadina.

At the time of the Buddha, there was a man named Visakha. He was a rich merchant from Rajagaha. One night he came home after work, as every other night. I can imagine him coming in, putting his briefcase next to the door, and his wife was waiting for him in the doorway, but he just passed her, didn't look at her.

She was a little intrigued because this was unusual for him, but she didn't do anything about it. She served the meal—dinner, maybe shepherd's pie—and he ate without even inviting her to sit, which was something he would have done usually. She would have served and he would have said, "Would you join me?" He didn't. He ate alone.

Afterward, she said, "Honey, what's going on?"

And he said, "I just had a very strange day. I met this man. He's called the Buddha. He gave me some teaching, and life is not going to be the same anymore. I'm going, and you can have everything—because he showed me the way out of this human predicament. I'm not totally done, so I want to follow him. You can have everything. It's all yours."

She could sense that there was something going on, so she said, "No, thanks. I'm going too. I want out of this human predicament."

And so he gave her a lift to the nunnery.

She didn't stay very long in the nunnery. I think she went into the woods, and she had tremendous determination. She went through the whole teaching, all the way through to the very end, to liberation.

Afterward, she was a little intrigued about what had happened to Visakha, her ex-husband. So she went to check on him. He was about done, but not completely done—he was up to non-returner, which is the last stage before the fourth stage of liberation in this tradition.

They had a conversation. In one part of it, he said to her: "What obsession gets obsessed with pleasant feeling? What obsession gets obsessed with painful feeling? What obsession gets obsessed with neither pleasant nor painful feeling?"

And she says: "Passion obsession gets obsessed with pleasant feeling. Resistance obsession gets obsessed with painful feeling. Ignorance obsession gets obsessed with neither pleasant nor painful feeling."

We know this, don't we? We know this stuff—the wanting, the not wanting. But I still want to take a little look at it.

There was a yogi who reported that she was looking at a tree. It was a beautiful autumn tree with all the colors. Then she turned around and went back to her walking. She noticed that she was actually thinking about knitting a sweater when she finished retreat—an orange and yellow mixed-colors sweater. And she got it. There was so much beauty in the tree, and there was a kind of need to own it. Unfortunately you cannot own—especially if you come from Switzerland, you cannot possibly put a whole tree back in your suitcase. So the mind, kind of desperate for keeping this going, was devising, designing a sweater made of the same colors.

This wanting to keep the pleasant going.

Also, about this obsession with pleasantness: sometimes we sit and there's boredom, or there's not much happening, and then we find ourselves in fantasy—pleasant in relation to future. One time I was on retreat, I was sitting, and then I noticed that I had been gone for a number of minutes, thinking...

that I should actually live in my car. It would solve a lot of my problems. Because I was going to different retreat centers and monasteries, I thought it would be the perfect mode of transportation. I would save on rent, I would have all my things together, and live a very simple life. It would be my little place, and I would organize it. It would be easy to take care of. I had images of—yes, it would get broken, but I would wait for the guy to fix it, and there would be beautiful sun, and I would just practice while they were fixing my car. And I noticed that in all of this, there was only pleasantness. Neutrality had been completely removed, and unpleasantness too. The mind will do that.

I didn't have to do much work to convince myself it was a little crazy. But I hear yogis come talking about getting married and moving to India to save the children of India with their new wife. The mind will do that. Even if there's dysentery in the picture of the trip to India, it's beautiful, and we will go through this together.

So it's interesting to watch. And in terms of the past, what do we do with our memories? I have some memories that when I tell people about them, when I think about them, they were so perfect. Again, I've removed all the neutrality or unpleasantness. I remember an event being really the perfect holiday. And I can see—it's almost hard for me to believe that I do this—but I have to look very closely and say, I am actually removing all the unpleasantness of this experience. Anyway, it's for you to perhaps look at also.

In terms of aversion, if I think of the past, how much time I can spend rehashing an unpleasant event, trying to remove the unpleasantness of it. Like, "I should have said that. They said that. If I hadn't said that, they wouldn't have said... Next time I'll say... I can't believe they said that." I would like to fix, remove the unpleasant from the past. So my job is to come to terms. I heard somebody say, "Give up all hopes of a better past."

And if I think of the future and unpleasantness—the amount of time one can spend in the unpleasantness of fear, fantasizing how bad this is going to be, compared to the actual event that sometimes... Let's take an example that is very close to me. The time I could spend fearing a dharma talk can be about a week—a few hours, a day of fearing a dharma talk—when the actual dharma talk lasts an hour and is a really beautiful mix of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. So how is it for you in your experience? To see that, to really connect with that.

Neutral is difficult to see. One image that is used is that of a hunter following the footprints of a deer. The hunter can follow the footprints in the dirt and the sand. And then at some point, the deer gets on rocks and starts climbing, and the hunter cannot find the traces of the deer anymore. As long as the feeling tone is moving, as long as the footprints are in the dirt—the pleasantness or the unpleasantness—it's easy to follow. But when it gets on the rocks, we lose sight of it. And we find it again later when it goes again on the grass.

So one thing to do is to be aware of the end of pleasantness or the end of unpleasantness. To know that we're moving into a new phase for maybe a few seconds.

Something else I want to say about neutrality—it's very interesting. In this conversation that Dhammadina has with Visakha, at some point he asks, "In what way is pleasant feeling pleasant, lady? And in what way painful?" And she says something very interesting. If you're going to tune in to one place in this dharma talk, maybe that's the good place.

"Pleasant feeling is pleasant in remaining and painful in changing. Friend Visakha, painful feeling is painful in remaining and pleasant in changing. Neutral feeling is pleasant in occurring together with knowledge and painful in occurring without knowledge."

Okay, what is that?

She says neutral feeling when unnoticed is unpleasant, and neutral feeling when noticed is pleasant. How interesting is that?

This means that when I'm not attentive, things don't stand out. It's boring. And boring is slight aversion—very slight aversion. I'm not connecting, I'm not with things, so it's boring. I'm looking for something else, for sense pleasure. But when I become attentive, then neutral becomes pleasant.

I think we have all experienced this. First, instructions are given about following the breath, and it's like, what a boring thing. It's a neutral object. But suddenly, it's like, "Oh!" It becomes interesting. It stands out. The floor is neutral, unnoticed—it's boring. But then if I put my attention on the floor, I notice different kinds of colored woods on the steps. It's orangey. In my mind, wood was brown, but it's a little orangey. Suddenly there can be interest. It becomes pleasant to look at all the different patterns.

This is a rich area to investigate. And for me, a link that I see in there is that peace is an acquired taste. People will report, "Nothing is happening in my practice." And that also speaks to our addiction to intensity. What would we choose, really, between sitting in front of a closed television on a Saturday night or watching something that we would think of as pleasant? For some people it's going to be a nice comedy, for someone else it's going to be the Dalai Lama teaching, for others it might be news about war somewhere. There's not much appealing in the closed television.

For me, there's a whole area of research in terms of neutral feeling and the potential that it has.

There's another conversation, between the carpenter Pañcakanga and Reverend Udāyī. They're actually having a kind of little fight over what the Buddha taught them. One says, "No, there are three kinds of feeling—pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral." And the other one says, "No, no, no, there are two kinds of feeling." "No, there are three. I know, I talked to the guy." "No, no, no, he told me there are two."

Carpenter Pañcakanga says, "Not three kinds of feeling, Reverend Udāyī, were taught by the Blessed One. It is two kinds of feeling that were stated by the Blessed One: pleasant and painful feelings. The neutral feeling was said by the Blessed One to belong to peaceful and sublime happiness."

That's interesting.

So Ānanda heard them arguing. He went to see the Buddha and said, "Well, one says this and the other says that." And the Buddha said they're both right. There are three kinds of feeling, and there are two kinds of feeling. And there are also six kinds of feeling.

I want to talk a little bit about that. It's very easy, actually. If you take pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, you can divide these into two groups, and you get six. The two groups are worldly and unworldly.

So we have the worldly pleasant and the unworldly pleasant feelings. The worldly unpleasant and the unworldly unpleasant. And then the same thing for neutral.

What does this mean? At the time of the Buddha, in the ascetic milieu, there was a belief that self-inflicted pain was helping eradicate bad karma. The idea was that if I hurt myself in some way, if I inflict painful feeling upon myself, I'm calling forth all my bad karma and deciding how to use it up quickly, so I can get to the end of my karma. That was the belief at that time.

The Buddha went for that approach for a while. He tried that method, and it was not working out very well. He was actually becoming extremely weak and putting his own life on the line for this spiritual search.

And so one day he had this memory—you might know this beautiful story of the rose apple tree. He was thinking, something's not working here. The end of this path that I'm on is death. This path of self-mortification cannot be right. There has to be another way.

He surveyed anything he knew, anything he could put his hand on that could be useful. And then he remembered. One time, when he was a child, there was a plowing festival. His father was a king, and he was there in the field where the farmers were plowing. The young prince was sitting under a rose apple tree.

In that moment he remembered, there was ease. There was contentment, satisfaction. There was not looking for something else, not wanting something else, not pushing something away. There were none of the hindrances. There was not a sluggish mind. There was not hyperactivity. There was just being under a tree—probably a feeling that time had stopped—and everything being in order.

The mind was unified. The mind was not split. There was no scatteredness. The mind was all together, very present for what was happening.

And he thought, this is not unwholesome. There's nothing wrong with that. This might actually be the way out.

That was the beginning of the middle path—where we don't indulge, as he had done before as a prince, in all the comfort of... in my mind there's always this "sex, drugs, and rock and roll." And there was not the other extreme of self-mortification. It was right in the middle. So he went for that.

This was the unworldly pleasantness that started to show up for him. He could no longer believe that all pleasant feelings were bad or unwholesome.

So what are these unworldly pleasant feelings? They are all the different things that have been talked about and that we experience here on retreat. I'm thinking of Myoshin's talk on the ten perfections just two nights ago. Generosity. Sometimes they're called not the unworldly but the spiritual feeling tones. And all of these have to do with renunciation.

The worldly ones are coming from the outside, from the gratification of the senses. The unworldly ones are coming from inside. That's one way we can recognize them.

Generosity as a pleasantness that comes from inside. Renunciation. Contentment. What are the other paramis? Blamelessness.

Patience. Not patience like gritting your teeth through something, but the deep, complete patience of acceptance. When we finally relax and let this be as it is, there's a pleasant feeling. It's the end of the fighting.

I even think of energy—when the energy is right, when we're putting exactly the right amount of effort. Or determination. Not determination like clenching, but think of the opposite, when there's no determination, when there's "I can't do this." The wholesome version is that quiet, clear sense of "I'm going to do this."

So these are some of the unworldly pleasant feelings.

There are also unworldly unpleasant feelings. What could these be? Sometimes there's this thing we call spiritual regret. When we see that we have done an action that was not beneficial for us or others, it's not pleasant to feel. But it's leading to the end of trouble.

So the unworldly points to progress on the path, as opposed to the worldly being a kind of regress. The worldly would feed the defilements, creating more of these tendencies of obsession with passion and irritation. The unworldly feeds us on our travels.

There's shame, spiritual shame or remorse. There is the suffering that leads to the end of suffering. There is irritation, and we connect with it rather than react to it. We're not producing more of the same. We're actually starving it—and that's unpleasant, but it's progress on the path.

And then the neutral unworldly feeling would come with equanimity.

So the worldly, the unworldly—that's the sixfold way of looking at feeling tones.

I'd like to look a little at feeling tones and point of view. This is an interesting area. The general belief is that point of view comes from rational thinking, from reason. But the Buddha said: take a good look to see if your views and opinions might not come from pleasant and unpleasant.

That's kind of not good news. When I first read that, I was a little dejected. If I was going to find that it was right, there was something very small about that—that my views that are so important, what I believe in, would be linked to pleasant and unpleasant.

We can look, for example, at the Buddhist teachings. There are many things said, ideas presented. And often we'll have this conversation about what is the essence of the teaching and what is actually cultural, what fit with the time of the Buddha and is not so relevant anymore. When we look at this precisely, we begin to see that a lot of what we call "cultural" and dismiss is often things that are unpleasant or uncomfortable, that don't fit with our culture. And "the essence" is often things that are quite pleasant to think of.

One example Joseph gave: in the teaching it says that there's more merit, more potential, when you give to somebody who's liberated or noble, very much on their way to liberation. There's more merit in this than giving to somebody else.

My view is that it's very important to give to people who are in need, and I'm not going to start asking questions, trying to find out how awake they are. If there's somebody who needs something, if there's a crisis somewhere in the world—that's where I want to give. So that's something I'm uncomfortable with in the teaching.

I can have the viewpoint and say, "Oh, that was probably added by the Sangha, the monastics. They needed requisites, so they probably said it's better to give to us. They probably added this along the way to make sure they would survive, so people would give to them rather than to poor people in the street."

I don't know. But this comes to looking at how our views might be shaped by what's comfortable for us. We can apply this examination to dismissing the whole teaching of rebirth because we weren't raised with it, because it's uncomfortable.

We can apply it to pretty much anything. I think I was raised with the idea that the bathroom door should be open when there's nobody in the bathroom—because you can see if there's somebody there or not.

And somebody else I live with thinks that it's more polite to close the door of the bathroom. It should always be closed. And so my viewpoint—is it based on reason, really? Or is it based on discomfort? I was raised a certain way, so it's unpleasant when the door is closed and I think there's somebody in the bathroom, so I don't go. Then I find out half an hour later that there's nobody in the bathroom. The door was just closed. And I really don't like that.

You can find other examples. One that I think of is: I strongly believe that there should be peace in a place where there's war. So that's getting a little edgy here. I don't know how you felt when I said that—that this could be based on a pleasant feeling.

I can see in myself, and this is the beginning of my research around this, but I can see that my wanting peace, my clinging to peace, my attachment to peace, that there should be peace over there—is it actually because it's extremely unpleasant to see the images that I see? So what I'm talking about now is the attachment to this viewpoint of peace, feeling very strongly about it. Why? Because it's unbearable. So we look at this.

One tool the Buddha gave was this: You have a viewpoint. Just treat it as a normal event in the mind. What you do is put it through the Four Noble Truths machine, the grinder. Is there suffering here? Is there clinging? What is the cause of clinging? You apply right concentration, right mindfulness, and you look. Because sometimes viewpoints are left untouched—opinions are left untouched. But we take them in and we examine: what is the suffering?

Because ultimately, the viewpoints that we have, the opinions that we have—and sometimes it might happen here in this hall. You hear something from a teacher giving a dharma talk that you don't like, that you don't agree with, that you feel strongly about. It's either what they're saying or how they're saying it, or their age maybe, or whatever it is. And the views we have—they should lead us to a tranquil mind and they should lead to letting go for liberation to happen. So it's very important to look at this: Is this viewpoint I'm having helping me right now towards a calm mind, or not?

In conclusion, I would say that with feeling tone, we can keep it extremely simple. In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, it's one of the four foundations. It's given by the Buddha a whole chapter in the four-chapter book. It could have easily been placed in body and mind. The four foundations are attention to the body, attention to feeling tone, attention to mind, and attention to mind objects. Feeling tone would have been easy to place somewhere else, but he made a whole area just for it. So it points to its importance.

And the instructions are very, very simple. "And how, monks..."—that's us tonight here—"...and how does a monk live contemplating feelings? Here, when experiencing a pleasant feeling, he knows: I experience a pleasant feeling. When experiencing a painful feeling, he knows: I'm experiencing a painful feeling. When experiencing a neutral feeling, he knows: I'm experiencing a neutral feeling."

And then he goes on with the worldly and unworldly. When experiencing a worldly pleasant feeling, he knows: this is a worldly pleasant feeling.

So we start by noticing just maybe pleasant, unpleasant, neutral feelings. And then we can add the other dimension of worldly and unworldly.

I read a story some years ago about a monk who had been practicing for a very long time. He had grown weary of the practice, tired of not achieving what he wanted to achieve—the freedom he sought. So he made a determination: "I'm going to put all my attention on one place and one place only, and it's going to be on feeling tone."

The determination was strong, and he went for it. Only that. He was in the forest in Thailand, and he committed entirely to noticing feeling tone. Within two weeks, the job was done.

And that is because vedanā is so impermanent. Take just a little block of time and put your attention on pleasant feeling. You can do that as you go walking the loop—just notice how quickly it changes. It's beautiful... then oops, something in the feet, a memory arises. It goes so fast. The whole experience goes. But if you just stay on feeling tone, it's very interesting. It changes very, very quickly. That's the power this practice can have.

I'll finish with the end of the conversation between Dhammadina and Visākha.

He asks, "Now what, lady, lies on the other side of pleasant feeling?"

"Passion lies on the other side of pleasant feeling."

"And what lies on the other side of painful feeling?"

"Resistance lies on the other side of painful feeling."

"What lies on the other side of neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling?"

"Ignorance lies on the other side of neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling."

"What lies on the other side of ignorance?"

"Clear knowing lies on the other side of ignorance." And I would guess that's for a practitioner.

"What lies on the other side of clear knowing?"

"Release lies on the other side of clear knowing."

"And what lies on the other side of release?"

"Unbinding lies on the other side of release."

Then he asks, "What lies on the other side of unbinding?"

And she says, "You've gone too far, friend Visākha. You've gone way too far. You can't keep holding on up to the limit of questions. I'm not answering anymore. If you want to know the whole story, go see the Buddha. He'll tell you."

So Visākha goes to see the Buddha and asks him. And the Buddha said, "Whatever she says, I would have said exactly the same thing, Visākha. Dhammadina is my foremost nun in terms of teaching."

This little teaching about neutral feeling—when noticed and when unnoticed—for me it was really a turning point in my practice. And it came from Dhammadina. And through her, it came from a friend, Andrea, a teacher who's going to be here later. There's a special flavor for me because two women practitioners I deeply respect gave me this teaching. I don't know—it's just nice. I like that.

CHAPTER 22

Karma

Joseph Goldstein · 59 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein addresses one of Buddhism's most essential yet often misunderstood teachings: the relationship between karma and emptiness. He skillfully navigates the apparent paradox that practitioners frequently encounter—if everything is empty of self, who experiences karmic results? Through the vivid analogy of a seed transforming into a tree, Goldstein illuminates how there can be lawful continuity without anything being 'carried over,' much like a seal leaving an imprint in wax without any part of the seal entering the wax.*
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> *Drawing from the opening verses of the Dhammapada, Goldstein emphasizes that mind is the forerunner of all actions, and that the Buddha identified karma specifically as cetanā (volitional activity). He guides practitioners to observe the 'about-to moment'—that impulse of willing before any action—and to examine the motivations associated with intentions, whether rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion or in generosity, love, and wisdom. He shares a moving personal story about killing a chicken during Peace Corps training, demonstrating how the mind retains impressions of past actions that surface during intensive practice.*
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> *The talk also cautions against misusing karma as a basis for blame or judgment, instead framing understanding of cause and effect as a foundation for compassion. Goldstein introduces the concept of puñña (merit) as 'provisions for the journey,' encouraging practitioners to recognize that even small wholesome actions accumulate like drops filling a bucket. Quoting Padmasambhava—'Even though my view of emptiness is as vast as the sky, my attention to the law of cause and effect is as fine as a grain of barley flour'—he demonstrates how these two truths must be held together in practice.*

There are two overarching perspectives that are at the heart of the Buddhist teachings. These principles provide a bridge between our meditative understanding, our meditative insight, and our lives in the world. These are the teachings on emptiness and on karma.

Questions often arise about how these two basic principles relate with one another. If there's no self, who experiences karmic results? If there's no self, who is reborn? If everything is empty, what does it matter what I do?

What we come to understand through our practice is that although things are empty of self, although things are insubstantial, still the unfolding happens lawfully. There is a lawful continuity to the process. To say that things are insubstantial does not mean that things are happening chaotically.

Think of planting a seed in the ground. The seed is in the ground and it germinates—there's water and the sun and all the nutriments—and the seed germinates and becomes a bigger plant and then grows into a sapling, into a tree, into a fruit. Is it that the seed travels somehow? That the seed remains the same and is carried up into the tree, into the fruit? No. The seed in every moment is in a process of transformation. It's like this, becoming this, becoming this, becoming this—lawfully.

To say that things are selfless means that there's nothing carried, but rather there is a continuity to the process. It's the process of becoming. And it's precisely this lawfulness which explains why when you plant an apple seed you don't get a mango tree. It's happening according to lawful causes and conditions.

We can see this in the unfolding of our lives in just the same way. Each moment's experience conditions in various ways the arising of the next. The Buddha talked of this not only within one lifetime, but from life to life. The quality of mind at the moment of death—it's called death consciousness, the last moment of consciousness in this life—the quality of that death consciousness conditions the arising of the first moment in the next life, what's called rebirth consciousness, in the same way that it is happening within this lifetime.

An example used to give the sense of continuity without things being carried over: if you imagine a seal imprinting into a piece of wax, and you take the seal away, the imprint is there, the influence is there, the conditioning is there, but there's nothing of the seal that has gone into the wax. There's no unchanging element that's carried through, and yet the process of imprinting, the process of conditioning is happening.

Another way of understanding what's carried over, whether it's moment to moment within this life or from life to life: someone once asked Trungpa Rinpoche, "What is it that's reborn?" And he said, "Your neuroses." I thought that was a very good expression of exactly what's carried over. It's the greed and craving and wanting in the mind, all the habituated tendencies—that's the force that conditions the arising of rebirth consciousness.

The possibilities for happiness in our lives rest on our understanding of how this process is happening. It's really an understanding of the nature of mind and how the unfolding is proceeding. The Buddha was very clear. He said that it all unfolds out of

our minds. In the famous opening verses of the Dhammapada: "Mind is the forerunner of all things. If we speak or act with an impure mind, suffering follows, as the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox." It's an agricultural simile, but the image is very clear. "And if we speak or act with a pure mind"—again it says mind is the forerunner of all things—"if we speak or act with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never leaves."

So we need to understand how this is working in our lives. We've talked in terms of the model for understanding the mind quite a few different times now. There's the basic moment of consciousness, which is simply knowing—the bare knowing of sight or sound or smell or taste or sensation or mind objects. Then along with each moment of consciousness, there arises in a variety of ways different mental factors, different mental qualities. These mental factors color or condition the consciousness according to their function. And it's these mental factors which are continually conditioning and reconditioning the patterns of our lives—love and fear and anger and joy and compassion and cruelty, mindfulness, ignorance. All of these are mental factors, and each one has its own function.

Each one colors and conditions that moment of consciousness. And each moment of consciousness is imprinting in various ways the one that follows. And so all lives unfold.

In our meditation practice, and with wise attention to our lives in the world, we come to a very clear and immediate experience of what leads to more suffering and what leads to happiness. This is no longer secondhand knowledge. We really are looking at our minds and seeing for ourselves what factors bring about suffering, what factors bring about happiness. It is in this direct seeing that knowledge is transformed into wisdom. It's no longer just intellectual knowledge—we're seeing it, we know it for ourselves.

The Buddha expressed this wisdom, and clearly, as he said, he was seeing it and expressing it from his own direct experience. He expressed this wisdom of what leads to what as the law of karma. It's interesting how this concept—perhaps in a more superficial way—is making its way into our Western culture. There are so many situations where it's referred to. I happened to read in the New York Times about a racing car champion. The first line read: "Karma rewards Ferrari champion. When Kimi Räikkönen won the 2007 Formula One Championship, it definitely had the feeling of karma finally coming back around for him, although it took a long time to develop." So it is getting into our culture. People are beginning to have some understanding, in some way, of things having effects.

Of course, the Buddha was a little more precise than the New York Times reporter. The Buddha identified karma very specifically. He identified it as volitional activity in the mind—that's what karma is. The karmic force in our lives comes from the volitional activity in the mind. This is the understanding that all volitional actions of our body, of our speech, of our mind, have the power to bring about results. This is what karma means: that every volitional action of body, speech, or mind has the power to bring about results.

When we look in our practice and experience, it's very helpful to look carefully and to get a good experiential understanding of what volition is. Again, we're going beyond just the conceptual level to really experiencing it. This is not hard to do because there are countless volitions during the day. Here we're using volition and intention synonymously.

The next time you're about to do something, in that about-to moment, see if you can get a sense—it doesn't have to be exact or precise—but even just a sense of what's going on in the mind, that quality of willing something to happen. It's the about-to moment, that impulse to do, the command moment. We just watch. We just watch in our minds: how are we experiencing it?

The caution here is don't get terribly uptight trying to pinpoint it. It's much more a question of just settling back and knowing: yes, there's a volition, there's an intention behind the act, there's some force which is impelling it. In a very relaxed and open way, it's almost like intuiting or getting a sense or a feeling. What is that like in the mind? That quality of willing something to happen, of volition.

It's interesting that volition is very noticeable at the beginning of an action, but actually volition is happening all through the action in order to keep the action going. If at any point in the middle of an action—even something as simple as taking a step—if the volition stopped in the middle of the step, the movement would stop. So volition is like that electric current which just keeps the action going.

Although these moments of volition are very quick and very small, they contain a huge power. This is not an insignificant thing. Each volition contains a huge power—the power to bring about future results. And not only just one result; each intention is like a seed that can bear many fruit. This is a very important piece of information because it's not necessarily obvious in the normal course of our lives. It is for this reason that the Buddha put understanding the law of karma right at the heart of what he called Right View: this understanding that intention contains the power, the force, to bring about results.

I've just been reading an autobiography of Einstein, in the section where they're talking about his famous formulation of $E=mc^2$, energy equals mass times the speed of light squared. In the description and explanation of it, of course, because the speed of light is so large—

and then you square that number, it's a huge, unbelievably huge number. So then you could have a very small amount of mass, which equals a huge amount of energy. And the example given in the book was that the energy contained in the mass of a single raisin would be enough to fulfill all the energy needs of New York City for a day. One raisin. So watch how many raisins you eat.

But the bigger lesson is simply this: it's an example that there's often a hidden power in very small things. And it takes an Einstein to discover what's contained in a raisin. It took the Buddha to discover the power that's contained in an intention. So don't overlook it.

We can explore this and understand it more fully. The intention itself is a neutral factor. The function of it is simply to organize or gather together or to direct all the associated other factors to accomplish a certain goal. So the intention, the volition itself, is neutral—it's just that organizing, directing, initiating, commanding force in the mind.

What determines the particular karmic result, the karmic fruit of our actions—that is, whether it brings us suffering or brings us happiness—are the motivations associated with that intention. The intention is neutral; it's just the force which gathers everything together and impels an action. What determines the karmic fruit is the wholesomeness or unwholesomeness of the motivation associated with it.

As you know, the Buddha talked of three wholesome and unwholesome roots. Greed, hatred, and delusion are the unwholesome roots. If that's what's associated with the intention, if that's our motive, the karmic fruit is going to be some kind of suffering. If the motivation is non-greed, or generosity, or love, or wisdom—and all those associated beautiful factors—the karmic fruit is happiness.

This is why it's been said, and we've mentioned it a few times here, that very pithy instruction or understanding: everything rests on the tip of motivation. Motivation is what's so important. We need to really be checking out what's the motive behind our actions. What's the motivation associated with the intentions that drive our lives? Because each one of those intentions has that enormous power to bear many, many fruits —in this life and, according to the teachings, in future lives. So it's worth paying attention to.

Going back to the original question: how do we integrate this understanding of karma with our realization of emptiness, that everything is empty of self and insubstantial? When I was in New York the other weekend for part of the teachings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, one of the lines in his teachings was: "A Buddha perceives the ultimate truth while leaving conventional truth untouched." So even as he sees the ultimate truth, the relative truth remains.

Padmasambhava, the great adept who brought Buddhism to Tibet, expressed it another way. He said, "Even though my view of emptiness is as vast as the sky, my attention to the law of cause and effect of karma is as fine as a grain of barley flour." So these are not two disparate things. Even as we may have a vast understanding of emptiness, emptiness of self, along with that we need our attention to the law of cause and effect to be as fine as a grain of barley flour.

To put it yet another way, this union of the relative and absolute levels—of karma and emptiness—we need to hold them together. The Korean Zen master Seung Sahn, who died a couple of years ago, was a really great Zen master and expressed things very well. In terms of talking about emptiness, he said: "There's no right and no wrong. But right is right and wrong is wrong." Now this is teaching. There's no right and no wrong, but right is right and wrong is wrong. We need to integrate these two levels and not hold them separately.

So how can we understand the play of karma in our lives and our experience so we begin to understand it and live it experientially, so it doesn't just become an interesting Buddhist philosophic theory? Because we could talk about the theory of karma and rebirth and all of that, but it could remain very theoretical. How do we actually experience it playing out in our lives?

We can look at the different ways that our actions of body, speech, and mind bring about different results. One way is by understanding what is called present karma—that is, we see it operating right now in the moment. How can we do this? Notice the immediate effect of different mind states. Notice the different qualities of fear or love or greed or stinginess or compassion. Which ones bring happiness? Which ones bring suffering? It's not hard to tell if we're paying attention to our experience. How do we feel when the mind is truthful? How do we feel when it's dishonest?

There's a present karma—there's an immediate karma happening right now. We can also notice present karma in how people are relating to us as we're expressing these different mind states. What kind of responses do we get if we're greedy? If we're generous? If we're angry? If we're compassionate? There's an immediate result that we can see in how people respond.

We can also understand present karma playing out in the various things we undertake to do—the degree to which present qualities in the mind affect our ability to accomplish our aims. If we have something we want to do, what is the effect of energy? What's the effect of sloth? What's the effect of discernment and wisdom? What's the effect of confusion and delusion in terms of the efficacy of our actions? This is another aspect of present karma: how we are in the moment, the qualities of mind in the moment, affect the very present result of our actions. And this is all obvious.

So there's another way we experience karmic results. The first is in present karma. The second is very interesting, and you have been experiencing this a lot over these past weeks. This is an important realization which all of you have had, and that is really seeing and understanding how the mind retains impressions of past actions. Have any of you had memories come up of past things? The impressions of our past actions become the source of either happiness or suffering. When we think of past wholesome actions, happiness, joy, delight arises in the mind. When we think of past unwholesome actions, there's suffering involved.

I had a very vivid example of this, which I've mentioned over the years, but it's such a strong experience for me. When I finished college, I went into the Peace Corps. I was being trained to teach English, but for some reason in our training we spent a couple of weeks at the end in Hawaii, in a camping situation. Part of the training—for some reason I do not fathom now—they wanted us to know how to kill chickens. At the time, I was in this very deluded mind state of thinking, "Yeah, I'm a man. I should be able to do this." Even though I really wasn't inclined to do it, there was part of me that felt this was important for me to do. And so I just took that big knife and chopped off its head. I had a picture of me holding this poor chicken, me with this big smile on my face.

Well, maybe it was five years later, I was in India. I had begun intensive practice, sitting quite deep, and all of this came back. It came back so vividly and with such a quality of horror in my mind. Basically, it was just murder. I murdered this being. And there was so much remorse and so much regret, really feeling it so deeply because I finally was present for what I had done. It was just so clear the mind retained the impression of that very deeply.

Just as another very interesting karmic twist—at tea time, I was staying at the Burmese Vihara in Bodh Gaya, and the food was very basic. But at tea time, sometimes they would serve us boiled eggs. And on the night where this was coming full force, when I was spending the whole day reliving this and feeling awful, I cracked open the egg and there was the embryo of a chicken in it. That is the one and only time in my life that has ever happened. It was incredible.

So the impressions are there. The impressions might also take the form not only of actions that we've done, but maybe just internalized feelings that were part of some experience we had that are embedded in our memories—feelings of anger or rage or unworthiness or fear or grief. We're in a certain situation and there's heavy emotions going on and we're not mindful, we're not aware, we're not conscious, and they become embedded in our mind stream.

There was one yogi years ago, when we first started teaching, a friend of ours who had been a medic in Vietnam during the war. When he came back and was just living a civilian life, he was having these endless nightmares of what he experienced. Then he came to his first retreat—it was a two-week retreat. And for almost the whole retreat, these were the images and memories and emotions that were coming up. It was this huge opening to what he had been carrying. It was amazing.

At the end of the two weeks, he went back home. I spoke to him afterwards, and all of the nightmares had stopped. It really points to the purifying aspect of this process of bringing awareness to all these impressions which are held in the mind.

This is part of the karmic unburdening. We all carry impressions—both the wholesome, beautiful ones and the ones that are unwholesome, ones of suffering. But as we can sit, as we do sit, in just an open, soft, receptive way, all of these impressions start coming up, releasing. If we can be with them mindfully, just being present, we allow them to come up and wash through. It's really part of a great karmic unburdening, a purifying process.

Even the way our practice unfolds is a karmic fruit. The Buddha talked of four kinds of practitioners. There are practitioners who develop slowly with a lot of pain. There are practitioners who develop slowly but with a lot of pleasantness. Practitioners who deepen their insight quickly with a lot of pain. And practitioners who deepen their insight quickly and with a lot of ease. I think most of us are in the first two categories.

But what I like about that is that it's very impersonal. It's not that we're doing something right or wrong. There are karmic conditions at work. We've all been conditioned by our past actions, and so our practice will unfold however it does. It's all impersonal, and it doesn't matter.

I want to read this story from the Enlightenment Songs of the Nuns from the time of the Buddha. It's collected in a volume called the *Therīgāthā*. This offers great hope to all of us.

"So it's twenty-five years since I went forth. Not even for the duration of a snap of the fingers have I obtained stilling of mind. Not having obtained peace of mind, drenched with desires for sense pleasures, holding out my arms, crying out, I entered the vihara, the monastery."

This is after twenty-five years. Not even for a snap of the fingers, a stilling of mind.

But then—and you have to remember the twenty-five years that went into this—she went into the vihara, sat down, remembered the teachings.

"Having heard the teachings, I sat down on one side. And suddenly, I knew that I had lived before. The deva eye had been purified. Supernormal power has been realized by me. I have attained annihilation of the defilements. The Buddha's teaching has been done."

So you never know. I just think of this nun who for twenty-five years persevered through all of those difficulties, never really having felt peace of mind, and yet the ripening was happening. The karma was ripening. Twenty-five years, and then, in a moment, everything opened up.

So we experience present karma as the immediate effect of our mind states and how people relate to us. We experience karma as the reliving of all these impressions that are in our mind stream and that come to the surface—the happiness of remembering skillful things, the suffering of remembering unskillful things.

Another way that we can understand the actual playing out of karma in our lives is seeing how the mind develops habits and patterns through habitual actions. We can really see it as the development of personality. We can understand certain personalities as being very fearful, very loving, very truthful, or angry personalities, very compassionate ones. The Buddha, of course, talked about the three basic personality types: the desirous type, the aversive type, and the deluded type, plus their positive counterparts.

The important thing to see here is that personality is not a fixed thing. It's something that has been built up and developed through repeated actions. Every time we act in a certain way, we are practicing that quality. Every time we get angry, we are practicing anger. Every time we're loving, we are practicing love. Every time we're greedy, we are practicing greed.

So it's really helpful to see that this is a very dynamic, ongoing process. We're right in the middle of the process now. What are we developing? What are we strengthening? Don't underestimate the power of small actions—small actions of renunciation or small actions of generosity. We need to look, we need to make a practice of looking at what the motives are in our minds.

What are the motives associated with these volitions, with these intentions? What's the motive behind our actions? What are we practicing? What are we strengthening? These become very useful questions.

When we become more sensitized to the motive behind our actions, we can see clearly: Is this skillful? Is it leading to happiness? Is it unskillful? Is it leading to suffering? We take a look, we become more aware of our motivations, and we ask ourselves: Where is this action leading? Do I want to go there?

You wouldn't hop on a plane without knowing its destination, probably. Well, we can know the destination of our actions. We can know the fruit of our actions as we become aware of the motivations behind them. This becomes a powerful practice.

And many times, of course, we're unaware. Many times we're in delusion, forgetful. That's fine. If we were all able to do this perfectly, we certainly wouldn't have to be here—this is a practice. Even if we just begin to be aware of some of our motivations in the course of a day, we begin to get more of a feel for what it means to understand the power of volition and to recognize the different motivations. This is a tremendous thing. It will have transforming power in our lives.

Great care is needed not to misinterpret the law of karma, because it can be misinterpreted in some pretty harmful ways. I want to point out a few flags to watch out for. Sometimes we can mix up this understanding of the law of cause and effect with attitudes of blame, judgment, resignation, or indifference. We get caught up in judging ourselves for the unwholesome motives or unwholesome actions that may arise. Or—and we can see this in the world a lot—there is the very unfortunate tendency of blaming the victim. Somebody who's in a situation of suffering, and we think, "Oh, well, that's just their karma." This is a perversion of the understanding. Instead of being a vehicle of compassion, this understanding becomes a vehicle of blame.

The subtlety here is that we can have the wisdom and the understanding that all situations have causes and conditions behind them. Situations are not happening accidentally. There are causes and conditions, including one's own past actions and the past actions of others. So we can understand this law of cause and effect and still respond to present suffering, either our own or others', with metta and compassion. We under-

stand that it's caused, and it may have been caused by that person's very actions. But that's not a cause for blame. It's not a cause for judgment. The appropriate response is compassion, arising from the understanding that we are all in this great human predicament, this samsaric predicament. We are all subject to this law of cause and effect. We've all done an endless number of past unwholesome things, things that have harmed others and harmed ourselves. And we've all been great benefactors to ourselves and others.

When we understand this, when we understand the magnitude of it, when we understand the law of karma and how it's all unfolding, it really gives rise to great compassion.

There's a professor of Buddhism at Columbia University, both a great scholar and practitioner. His name is Robert Thurman. He gave a wonderful example of just this point. He said: Imagine yourself on a subway. The subway car is filled with all different kinds of people—some who are very happy, some who are really in a miserable state, some who are very angry, all kinds, just all kinds of people. Now imagine you're on this subway car with all these people for eternity. What would be the best thing to do? How would you relate?

The people who are really suffering or miserable or causing harm—clearly your own happiness would be enhanced if in some way you could relieve their suffering. If in some way we could relieve their suffering, bring them to a place of greater understanding, greater happiness, everybody in the car is going to benefit, oneself included. I just like this image because it so highlights how if we're just adding to the misery by a lot of judgment, a lot of blame, a lot of anger at what we see, we're just contributing to the general misery of everyone on the car.

We are on that subway car. It's just big. And we share this journey with all other beings.

So even as we understand that suffering is often, though not always, the result of karmic causes, still we respond with compassion, with metta. When we begin to reflect on this and understand it more deeply—experientially, not just conceptually—this understanding that actions have the power to bring about results becomes the important point. Small things, like that raisin, can contain a huge power. Intention, volition is like that. It contains the power to bring about results, many results, countless results from each intention.

When we understand this, when we fully grasp this, it changes our relationship to experience in a couple of ways. First, there's greater acceptance of what's arising, rather than resentment or pride. Instead of resenting the difficult things, we understand: yes, this is arising out of causes, out of past action. Or if good things are arising, instead of pride or thoughts of how great I am, there's also understanding: yes, this came out of past wholesome actions. There's a greater level of acceptance.

Acceptance of these changing conditions does not mean passivity; it doesn't mean resignation. It actually opens us to respond appropriately to what's arising. But the responses can come from wisdom rather than reactivity. So when we see the law of karma playing itself out, this law of cause and effect, and understand the power of volition, it leads to a greater acceptance and responsiveness.

It also leads to a much more mature level of responsibility that we take for the actions in our lives. We begin to take a longer range view of things, instead of this very Western sense that our happiness depends on immediate gratification. When we understand the law of karma, we take a very broad, long range vision of how our lives are unfolding, which then leads us to take a strong interest in what we're doing and in the motivations behind it.

In Buddhism, there's a concept which is very deeply embedded in the teachings and which is very hard for Westerners to understand. The Pali word for it is puñña, often translated as "merit." In popular Buddhism, there's this sense of "it's good to make merit." But I think for many Westerners, that's hard—I don't think we quite get it. For a lot of us, it reminds us of getting gold stars in first and second grade.

But the Buddha talked a lot about merit. He spoke of how merit is the source of happiness, how merit is the condition for awakening to happen. What is merit? It's the accumulation of wholesome actions. And one of the expressions of merit, which I think is such a beautiful, vivid, clear expression of its value, is this: it was described as provisions for the journey.

If we're on a journey, who wouldn't want to be well-provisioned? This is a journey that's going to take us across a lot of terrains. Sometimes it will be great fertile plains, sometimes deserts, sometimes mountains. It's good to be well-provisioned. Merit is the provisions. Merit is that force of wholesome actions. That's what's carried along with us.

So when we see this, when we understand the power of karma, the fact that our actions actually do bring results, then we start taking care with what we do. And this understanding can lead to a very joyous quality of mind, because it's coming out of a place

of understanding: this is a good thing to do, this is going to be the cause and condition for my happiness, for my well-being. And out of our own well-being, we can be the cause for the well-being and happiness of others.

Don't underestimate the power of small actions. Our mind is like a bucket being filled drop by drop with water—just drop, drop, drop. Each drop seems so small, but the bucket stays there and the bucket gets filled. Each action we do is like another drop in our mind. What are we filling our minds with? Are they the wholesome qualities? Are they the unwholesome?

I came across a blurb on the back of a book—I was probably in some airport or something. I loved it.

A novel of love, lust, passion, and greed—something for everyone. A real delight.

There's another verse in the Dhammapada which again sums up in a very pragmatic, practical way how we start living this understanding. I can't emphasize it enough: this is not about Buddhist philosophy. It's about our lives and understanding what brings happiness and what brings suffering. It has this tremendous immediacy for us. And this is the great gift of the Buddha's teaching—he was just so clear about all this.

Again, from the Dhammapada: "No deed is good that one regrets having done. A deed is good that one doesn't regret having done, that results in joy and delight."

When I read that, I thought, that would be a good thing to remember. Because I see in myself very often, in a moment of intention, in a moment of volition, I'll often know this is something that I'm not going to feel great about. It doesn't have to be a huge bad thing—it can be on very subtle levels. But just something that, in looking back, I might regret having done. And on the other hand, there are those actions where we just know that this action will bring no regret, that this action will bring joy and delight in looking back at it.

So it becomes like a mirror for us—a mirror for our own actions, if we're mindful enough, aware enough, in the moment of intention, in the moment of volition. And again, we'll miss many. Our habits are strong. We'll get caught up in the delights of that novel many, many times. But we practice. This is our practice.

Just a couple more things to say about karma, of interest in understanding how it unfolds. It's not a closed, mechanistic system, because every action we do in the present feeds into the stream and influences and conditions the unfolding. The Buddha talked

about surrounding unwholesome actions with many wholesome ones. Because as we surround an unwholesome action with many wholesome ones, it mitigates the karmic results. It's a very fluid system.

The example that was given: if you take a glass of water and put some salt in it, the whole glass of water becomes very salty. You put the same amount of salt in a pond, you can hardly taste the salt at all. The Buddha was saying that the karmic fruit of an unwholesome action, for a person whose mind is filled with unwholesome action, is very strong. The karmic fruit of an unwholesome action in a mind that is filled with wholesome action is much mitigated—it's hardly felt.

So we are influencing, even now as our lives are unfolding, how we will be experiencing the fruit of our past karma. It's very fluid. And that again gives energy to taking care and to being aware.

The Buddha called the understanding of karma "the light of the world." This understanding is the light of the world because it shows us what leads to suffering and what leads to happiness. We don't have to muddle around in confusion. It illuminates the world; it illuminates our lives.

When we have this understanding of the law of karma, of cause and effect, the importance of intention and the motivations around that intention—whether they're wholesome or unwholesome—it gives us the power to create and shape our lives. It's like our life becomes an art form. Our life is the medium, and we are creating it through our actions. This is a great empowerment of our beings, the more fully we understand it, reflect on it, and experience it for ourselves.

I'll close with this wonderful haiku by the Zen poet Bashō. I think it somehow captures this whole understanding of karmic unfolding—of fruits coming out of action, out of volition. He wrote:

The temple bell stops,
but the sound keeps coming
out of the flowers.

May the merit of all our practice be dedicated to the welfare and the happiness and the awakening of all beings everywhere.

CHAPTER 23

Living a Life of Dhamma Inquiry

Myoshin Kelley · 54 min

> *In this heartfelt talk from the 2007 IMS three-month retreat, Myoshin Kelley addresses a fundamental question: how does one live a life centered on Dhamma inquiry without burning out through striving or rigid views of what practice should look like? She shares her own struggles with perfectionism and her experiences in Burma, where pushing too hard led to collapse, teaching her valuable lessons about balance and trust.*
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> *Kelley offers intimate portraits of two teachers who embodied this life of inquiry: Daw Inyeti, a Burmese nun whose presence radiated generosity, vitality, and playfulness while remaining grounded in stillness; and Sayadaw Utejānīya, who practiced diligently as a layperson with family and shop before ordaining, demonstrating that awakening doesn't require perfect conditions. Both teachers showed her that Dhamma inquiry isn't about achieving a fixed state but maintaining an open, questioning presence in all circumstances.*
>
> *The talk explores the essential role of trust in practice—trust that allows the mind to become silent and still, trust that reality itself supports us. Drawing on teachings from Hamid Ali and a Native American poem about being found by the forest, Kelley points toward a receptive quality of being rather than grasping. She emphasizes that our training in sitting and walking meditation is preparation for meeting life's challenges with wisdom, bringing practice to every aspect of existence—relationships, work, boredom, fear, and the mundane repetitive tasks that comprise most of our days. The path leads not to a charmed existence but to moments of clarity that build confidence and faith to continue the inquiry.*

I realize that if there are some of you who keep track of days, you might be expecting Joseph to be sitting here tonight—just noting expectation. And not to worry, he will return.

The name of tonight's talk is Living a Life of Dharma Inquiry.

In my last talk, I mentioned that I had had a very strong fear of getting to my deathbed and looking back on my life and having the sense that I'd never really lived, that I'd spent my time dreaming my life away. It has been in my life a very real fear, a fear that I think emerged in my youth and has come to me in different ways. It seems to have in some way contributed to what seems to be my life koan: this very aspect of how

one lives a life of Dharma inquiry, how one lives bringing truth to the center of one's life, how one does that without driving oneself crazy—"I must be perfect, I must get it right"—without burning oneself into the ground through striving.

Which, in fact, I did do. At one point in my practice in Burma, I was in a pretty collapsed state from holding rigidly to a view of practice, a view of what that life might look like. And it didn't meet what was happening. So it was in many ways a very brutal experience, but there was a lot of learning from it. Sometimes we drive ourselves into the ground, and that's how we learn. I realized I can be pretty thick-headed at times, can be pretty strongly attached to my ideas. But at least with aging, maybe, we get a little wiser.

In more recent years—and I think throughout my life, I just didn't have the eyes to see—I really do have a sense that we get our lessons, we get what we need to wake up. I met a couple of people that to me really have a posture in life of living from this place of Dharma inquiry. In my life I've met some beings that seem very realized—being in their presence, you can feel the compassion, you can feel the loving-kindness, the wisdom is evident. This is not to say that these two people didn't have these qualities, but they also had a stance, and it was just because of the way I spent time with them that I could get more of a felt sense of what it is like to live where one is always looking, listening, looking to truth—where one is engaged with life, but with an open mind.

I'd like to briefly mention these two people because they really did have an impact on me. The first was a nun named Daw Inyeti, or Daw Ahntie, as Daw Lay, as she was often called. She was the abbess of the nunnery that I went to live in for a period of time when I had temporarily ordained as a nun. It was in Sagaing Hills. I may speak a little bit more about that later, but right now the focus is on her because she was so impactful.

I had been practicing with Burmese teachers for a number of years, but it had all been male monastics. This was my first time of really being immersed in a world with other women, young girls. She was just a remarkable role model for a woman in a position of authority.

Because she didn't speak English, it's not like I have a lot of stories to tell about what she said. She did speak a little bit of English, but it was only enough that we constantly miscommunicated. But it was her presence that spoke to me. She was so alive. She was a tiny woman, but just a fireball of energy.

I had the good fortune of being able to walk through Sagaing Hills, which in itself is an exquisitely beautiful place. It was a place that earlier I had been to, and when I was there I just really found the aspiration welling up to go back there and practice. And there I was finding myself as a nun. Just because they didn't quite know what to do with me in the nunnery—I wanted to work with them but they didn't want me to work with them. I had a different status because I was a foreign nun, and they just wanted to respect that, but it really led to an unusual lifestyle.

I couldn't work with them. In fact, if I tried to work with the people cutting vegetables, or if I was even seen sitting with them, Daw Lay would come up and smell my fingers to see if I'd been cutting garlic. One of the things that we did was we went out together a lot.

Sometimes it was by car, and if we went in the car, she would give me her seat, which was in the front seat. That was just the way she responded. Her response to life was this sense of complete generosity. I was quite sure that if I had needed a robe, she would have taken the one off her back for me. Her generosity was so evident.

And she was so playful. When we went places, I could see people had a lot of reverence for her, a lot of respect, but she had this lightheartedness—people were often laughing with her. Then we would walk into some pagoda, a place of reverence, and she'd be touching everything, feeling it. And me, I'm not wanting to do anything wrong, but she was just in the thick of it, this sense of vitality and aliveness with it.

Even though she couldn't speak English, she was always trying to teach me in some way. As we would walk through these hills that were magically beautiful—and this was the romantic part of the time; the rest of it was not so romantic—she would teach me a chant, and we would just walk through chanting together. In the monastery, they taught the thirty-two parts of the body as their meditation, and so she would just be pointing to the different parts of the body. Her desire to share was so strong.

It was really from her that I learned this posture of presence, openness, vitality, and engagement with life. But at the same time, it radiated through this sense of stillness. So it wasn't a feeling of distancing, but a real connection—and not reactive, not the kind of reactivity that I, in my life, have so often experienced. And yet, I didn't have the sense that she thought she was done. She looked like, to me, she was continuing to practice. She worked from morning to night, and the morning began with practice and ended with more formal practice. It felt like everything was being brought into the context of practice.

The other person who had a strong effect on me was Sayadaw U Tejaniya, whom I think we have referred to throughout the course and whose different teachings we have shared. Sayadaw U Tejaniya was a layperson before becoming a monk, which I think most people are. He got married, had a child. He was a shopkeeper, and he practiced hard in his life. He didn't let the fact that he had a wife to take care of, a child—he didn't let that stop him in his practice. He didn't let the conditions of life say, "Sorry, I can't have this life of dharma inquiry. Maybe I can go on a weekend retreat this year and let that be enough." He practiced in his shop. He practiced with seeing meditation a lot.

But again, beyond the story of his life, from him too there was a vibrational transmission of a mind that is always looking. I found that in my interviews with him, there were different ways I could see it. One day I asked him a question, and he responded. His response was great. I took it in, I left. I came back four days later, and he said, "You know, the last time I saw you, you asked me this question. After you left, I just went and sat and looked at it in my own experience. So I just want to expand my answer." It really came out of not a pat answer that he was giving, but just what happened when he looked in that moment into his mind.

Then it could also happen that he would give you an answer to a question, and you might say something, and he'd just reevaluate it all. It would be like, "Oh, no, let's go in a different direction." But it was just that openness, that sense of inquiry, and that willingness to do it in all circumstances of life.

It's my sincere hope that your training in being here is not just to be calm, to be peaceful, but to really find the tools—a practice that will sustain you in your life, that will be helpful in the midst of chaos when things get difficult. Only recently I spoke to a woman who has been coming for years and practicing here. She's meeting challenges on the physical level, really quite strong challenges. But when I talked to her, I could see that all of the practice she had done was helping her. That didn't mean she was just focusing on her breath. It meant she was opening up to what a wise response was in this moment and how she could use these conditions as path, as the means to awakening.

That's what our training here is for. And that's where I really encourage you to watch any fixed ideas you have of what practice should look like, how we can rigidly fall into thinking what it is—this idea that we sit, we walk, we sit, we walk.

And sometimes in practice we do, because that's the wise response. But at other times, other things are happening. And that's where we see if our training in sitting and walking was just about having another meditative experience, or was really helping us

to find the tools—find the way to stay connected, to look more deeply, to not just be caught on a superficial level, on a conceptual level, but a way of meeting this moment with all the wisdom that is accessible.

Going back to this aspect of living a life of Dharma inquiry: this inquiry does need to be supported by skillful means. It needs to be supported by the understanding of what helps us to connect. Through our time here, we are really learning to stabilize awareness, to have more and more moments where there is recognition of what's happening in this body and mind. This in itself has a huge impact. It really helps us to see more deeply what our motivations are, what's moving us, where reactivity is still present, how the mind is relating to experience. When the attention is stable, we can see. Things can be recognized. It's not such a mystery.

Through this, we learn to live honoring the level of the relative, the level of convention. We learn about cause and effect, karma. We learn how our actions have consequences. And as our practice deepens this recognition of the conventional level, we also begin to see into the level of the absolute. We begin to see into the nature of reality. We may have moments—because of the capacity to know these two levels—where we do not feel so bound, so burdened by this mind and body. Moments where we discover the capacity to love fully, knowing there is nothing to hang on to, and yet loving anyway. Because this is wisdom. We live in the world as if everything matters. We take care and respect, and at the same time we let go.

And yet we will find that we still, over and over again, get caught in identifying, reacting. If we have this sense of Dharma inquiry, this sense of investigation, this doesn't become a personal failing, a way of saying we're not good enough, that we can't do it. It just gives us something else to explore, to know, to make friends with.

I'd like to share a poem called "Lost." It's from a Native American elder.

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you are not lost. Wherever you are is called here, and you must treat it as a powerful stranger and must ask permission to know it and be known. The forest breathes. Listen. It answers. I have made this place around you. If you leave it, you may come back again, saying here. No two trees are the same to the raven. No two branches are the same to the wren. If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you, you are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows where you are. You must let it find you.

Stand still. The forest knows where you are. You must let it find you.

I found this last line to be so potent, having seen my own tendency to try to find, to try to get—and to hear this poem that points towards such a state of receptivity, of being, of allowing, that is right here, right now. It needs an open mind, a mind not filled with ideas and beliefs and concepts. It needs us to recognize these ideas, beliefs, concepts that bind us, that become our prisons. And instead, moving—or it's so funny, even saying the word "moving"—there is like, there's no language. And I think "being" is the word that comes closest.

Probably some of you are like me and have noticed that the being is easier when the conditions are pleasant. When we like it. The being when it's reactive, when it's a challenge, when it hurts—the touching this, just knowing it.

requires a level of trust, a deep level of trust. It's not a blind trust. It's a trust that I know, from listening to you each day, you are getting in touch with—where you can really trust in the power of mindfulness, where awareness becomes a refuge. It is what supports. It is like a life jacket, in a sense, knowing that we don't get lost in a way that brings confusion, that enhances bewilderment.

If we don't have trust as we're sitting here, we're probably looking for specific results, wanting things to be a certain way. It's like going into the lab to do an experiment but already having decided how that experiment will come out. This doesn't lead to openness. It doesn't lead to direct experience. We really need to have that capacity to sit with don't know mind, or beginner's mind. Trust is really what enables us to move into unknown territory, or else we're just caught in trying to make ourselves more secure, feel more safe.

I'd like to share a teaching from a teacher named Hamid Almas. He lives on the West Coast and brings together a synthesis of Eastern philosophy and Western psychology. This is what he says about trust:

We do not trust that if we relax, we will have the capacities, we will have the intelligence, we will have the strength, and we will have the compassion that we need to deal with our lives. We don't trust that reality as it is is fundamentally fine and will work for us and support us without any interference on our part. Basic trust is learning that life is manageable, is workable, that we can relax into it and just let it be. It is that trust that the universe itself supports us and that we have the inner resources to deal with whatever life presents us. Basic trust means trusting enough to let your mind stop, to be silent within. Trust to let yourself be silent within. Knowing this is—if there is something you need to know, the knowing will come. It means trusting that if you need to do

something, you will be able to do it. It means accepting and trusting the silence, the stillness, the beingness. If we don't trust, we can't let our minds be silent and we can't let ourselves be still.

Have you seen that in your own mind? Where in a moment of silence, there's too much, and there's a recoiling, a pulling away? That's okay. Don't judge that. Because that's what the Dharma inquiry comes into. But this quality of trust—we need to look in our own experience and really get a sense of where that trust comes in, where that softening happens, where that acceptance happens.

I had an exercise I used to do in my life, after I'd been sick for a number of years. I discovered that it was so healing to every day, for just one moment, allow my heart to open. At that time I lived in a much different climate. I lived in Australia, in a subtropical area, and there was a beach just below where I lived. I could swim every day. Not all year long, but much of the year, the water was warm. Some days it was calm. I would go out into the ocean, lay on my back, and just let myself feel held, letting the ocean hold me. It got me in contact with that sense of trust.

In our lives, it's letting the Dhamma hold us, not feeling like we have to do it all.

So exploring here—what helps that trust to strengthen? Where is your confidence growing? My experience has certainly taken me to mindfulness, awareness. What becomes reliable?

I had a lesson in seeing this that came from my time as a nun in Burma. I had actually gone to Burma after I'd read the book *Great Disciples of the Buddha*, and I was just really struck by people's diligence, their capacity to really live this life of Dharma inquiry. The question had come up in my mind: Am I doing enough? I wanted to go to Burma not to practice in intensive retreat—I'd done that a number of times before—but just to live as a nun amongst nuns and see what their life was like, to see what else I might be able to bring into my own life as a layperson.

Just pausing here to say, because my two examples before were monastics: this talk is not in any way meant to suggest that if you're living a life of Dharma inquiry, you shall ordain. That's not what it's pointing to. It's really about how we live our lives. But this was about seeing what they do in their lives that I could bring back to mine.

I'd gone to Burma, ordained with my teacher, Chamye Sayadaw, or Sayadaw Janaka, and it had been a very profound experience—an experience where I did have a sense of the inner and outer world being in alignment. There was a sense of grace in ordaining.

But very shortly after that, the honeymoon was over. Unfortunately, it didn't last very long.

And then the lessons came hard and fast. I found living in robes was such a strong mirror. It just intensified what my motivations were, what my reactions were.

Very soon after I ordained, I traveled up to Sagaing Hills. I first went with a friend who was a nun and a Burmese woman, so they could translate for me because I was going to an area where people didn't speak English. I went to the place where my teacher had sent me, and the conditions were just very, very difficult. In the end I decided not to stay there, but went to another nunnery where the conditions were a little bit better.

But all kinds of challenges emerged. The language barrier. A sense of intense loneliness, because I was surrounded by people who were talking, and I felt that isolation, that not being a part of. I had problems with receiving too much food and not knowing what to do with it, and then that attracting bugs. It was a challenge. It all became workable, but there were challenges. The insects were biting me so severely that they actually bit my bottom so badly I couldn't sit down on it. And then bugs in my bed. It was living by the precepts—what do I do? I felt challenged on so many levels. And there wasn't a strong sense of grace. I didn't feel like I was gracefully handling this. It was quite painful, a lot of it.

And so there came the time when I left, and I was sitting at the airport in Yangon, reflecting on my time. It wasn't like sitting there going, "Oh, that was great. Oh, that was a good insight." I was sitting there scratching my head saying, "What was that about?"

And then something very unusual happened. At this time in Burma, the modern-day world had not caught up in the same way it has now. The airport had recently been redone, and there was a video screen. That was totally—you know, from where I'd been in Sagaing Hills, where there are monastics everywhere, temples, pagodas, just the sense that you could run into the Buddha himself there—and here I was in this airport with this video screen.

All of a sudden, there came a song. It was by Sarah McLachlan. And I didn't hear the line right, but I heard it right, just not the way it was. The line was, "living in a mystery." When I heard that line, it was like a bubble popped—this mind had been trying so hard to figure things out, to put things in their proper place. And in that moment came the sense: I didn't have to do that. I could simply relax and trust. And from that place, the Dhamma reveals itself.

But it is really hard to tell that to the frightened mind. I think fear is something we hang out with a lot. If you can, just touch it with kindness, with that refuge of awareness—to know it's just fear. These fears are so often based on ideas, what it'll be like if we really let go. An idea is not truth, not wisdom.

The blessings of walking this path. Today, I kept having this image in my mind: having my head to the floor, just bowing, that sense of surrender. The Tibetans say the preciousness of this human birth, and sitting here right now, it's just such an honor to have a mind and body to be able to do this exploration.

My notes are making no sense to me. I've never had a relationship with words. When I first started teaching, people kept saying to me, "Is English your second language?" My response was, "Yes, silence is my first."

Live it, be it, open to it, trust it, inquire. You can do it. That's what the Buddha said. He said, if it was not possible, I would not ask you.

I know many times I've thought, it's not possible. It's not possible. And that's where, sometimes, the taking of refuge helps. Maybe we feel really shaky with our mindfulness—a moment of mindfulness every two days doesn't seem like a lot. But just knowing all the beings that have walked this path before us, all those that have awakened—they were just like us.

That's where I love to read the stories of awakened beings, because you see they came from all different kinds of circumstances, so many horrendous ones. I actually read a story today that I didn't want to tell you because it comes from the Japanese lineage, and somewhere my mind was just like, whoa. It's where my mind says, can you really learn anywhere? It was this woman who was a prostitute, and a monk came along and encouraged her to practice with mindfulness, to do it where she was.

And it's how we apply, how we look, what the attitude is. We have to look at the mundane, because we're not going to have a life that is the charmed existence where we have the perfect conditions. People living in monasteries—they have to do the menial jobs. The repetitiveness, that's what life brings: these tasks that need doing over and over again. And this is where we practice.

As you're here practicing your yogi job, or even just the in-out of breathing—yes, it's repetitive, but the boredom comes not from the experience but from the quality of attention. We really begin to see this. We see that when there's mindfulness, things do become more vibrant, more alive, more clear. Not that we can practice to get that, but that it can happen. And that's because of the quality of attention.

Bringing this to everything—everything—including to the boredom. Boredom, we go nuts with it. It's so unpleasant, so painful. But look what's happening. Here through this time, we're learning to recognize what the mind is doing. Watch the mind. Pay attention. This is where the learning is. This is where wisdom is.

Living in a wholehearted way that at times seems half-hearted might be what's possible. But when we do this the best we can and let that be enough, it leads to a sense of care and respect in how we live our lives. It leads to a sense of devotion—really bringing that devotion to this moment, to truth unfolding, life unfolding.

Our time here really nourishes any aspiration to awaken. And maybe it's not clear exactly what our motivation is, but it certainly clarifies itself as we practice. Because we see the value, we understand for ourselves through these little moments of seeing clearly, a moment of not clinging, a moment of letting be.

This is a teaching from Sayadaw U Jotika from Burma: "A fragmentary or specialized approach to life will not work. One needs an all-around understanding. In the body, every part is related to every other part. So it is in life. Every aspect of your life is related to every other aspect of life. The economic, sexual, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual aspects of your life are all related. You cannot keep them separate. If you try to keep them separate, your life will be unfulfilling and unharmonious. There will be conflict, schism, paralysis."

Every aspect we bring to our practice—our relationships, sexuality, our rage, frustration. The way we live, what we do, what we say. Bringing this quality of devotion, care, respect. We do this. Maybe—I haven't died yet—but maybe when we die our hearts will be at peace.

There's a sense of rising up to the challenge. Just to move out of living in a habituated way, living driven by habits. A sense of coming out of the fog of delusion. Moments of clarity.

I remember that from one of my first retreats with Sayadaw U Pandita, where I felt just a mess most of the retreat. And then there would just be a moment where there was just seeing, hearing, touching, tasting. It was like a clear bell ringing. Stepping into the clearing from a jungle. These moments bring trust, bring confidence, bring faith, and this gives us the energy to go forward, to look, and to live a life of Dharma inquiry.

May all beings come to know a heart that is unbound.

CHAPTER 24

Joseph's Dhamma Story - Part 1

Joseph Goldstein · 1h01

> *In this intimate and inspiring talk, Joseph Goldstein offers a rare autobiographical account of his spiritual development, tracing the path from early childhood experiences with anger to his discovery of meditation in Thailand during the Peace Corps, and eventually to years of intensive practice in Bodh Gaya, India.*
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> *Joseph recounts pivotal moments that shaped his understanding: recognizing at age eleven the space between impulse and action, his father's sudden death at twelve, encountering the Bhagavad Gītā's teaching on non-attachment to the fruit of action, and a profound opening experience while listening to the Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation. He shares how he came to study with Munindraji, describing his teacher's unconventional style and memorable teachings, including "the Dhamma protects those who protect the Dhamma" and "the path of the Dhamma is to be simple, not to be a simpleton."*
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> *The talk offers practical wisdom on working with difficult mind states, the relationship between sudden awakening and gradual cultivation (drawing on the Korean Zen master Chinul), and how mettā practice can illuminate our shadow sides. Joseph emphasizes that freedom depends not on external conditions but on our relationship to our own minds, and that transitions between retreat and daily life are themselves opportunities for practice. He concludes by reflecting on what inspires him most: the possibility of purifying our motivations and the understanding that the brahmavihāras are the natural expression of wisdom and selflessness.*

So, happy Halloween.

Tonight, instead of the usual kind of dharma talk, I thought I would share with you some of the ups and downs of my own spiritual journey. Hopefully it might be of some help to you in your own unfolding practice, because so much of what's experienced, even though it's conditioned very personally by our own circumstances, so much of what we experience is in common.

As you know, in many spiritual traditions, it's some awareness of suffering that often prompts at least the initial looking and investigation and wondering: How can I understand this life?

Well, for me this happened quite young. Growing up as a young boy, I would have these intermittent and quite uncontrollable temper tantrums. Something would provoke it, and then an explosion of temper. It made me and everyone around me quite miserable—not a very pleasant situation. But I didn't know what to do about it.

Then, when I was about eleven, I had what I consider my first real insight into the workings of the mind. It came in a very childlike way, but it was profound in its own way. Just after one of these big outbursts of anger and temper and screaming, I looked into my mind and realized that there was the possibility of a space between the impulse to the temper outburst and the action. I saw that in that space there was a choice.

This was kind of amazing to me—to see that I actually could have some control over what seemed so uncontrollable. In a very young and naive way, I did the very ordinary practice of what we're often told with temper: count to ten before you say anything. That's just what I started doing. I would count to ten, and the impulse for the outburst would pass. It was quite amazing—a real transformation in that particular context.

When I was twelve, my father died quite suddenly, within about a two-month period. He got sick and then he died. He had leukemia. Even though it took me quite a long time to process it emotionally—because in those years, at least in my family background, that really wasn't a topic of conversation, it wasn't talked about—I was just being a twelve-year-old, holding the various emotions but not really understanding them.

Even though it took me a long time to process emotionally, a rather profound understanding of death arose: somebody's there and then they're not there. Just what that experience is like, and the very immediate realization that it can happen any time—it's not just some time in the future.

I finished high school, went on to college, and started studying philosophy because I was still interested in trying to understand life. But studying philosophy with that end in mind was very frustrating for me, because at the university, the professors really weren't interested in philosophy as a way to live life. It was just trying to understand what this guy said, what that guy said—with no application at all, as far as I could see, to living a life wisely. That was not the approach taken, at least then. Maybe it's changed.

But I was taking one course in my philosophy training, a course in Eastern philosophy, and we were reading the Bhagavad Gita. One line in that book just jumped out at me in a way that I really didn't understand. I didn't understand why, but something resonated very deeply. The line was: *Act without attachment to the fruit of the action.*

This was my first introduction even to the notion of non-attachment, because it's not a big Western value. This was really the first time I'd come across the idea. I didn't really have any understanding of it or quite know what it meant, but something registered very deeply. There's something here that I want to explore.

Years later, I heard the Dalai Lama express this same teaching from the Bhagavad Gita—act without attachment to the fruit of the action—but he expressed it in another way, which I've mentioned earlier in the retreat but wanted to reiterate because it's such a powerful teaching in the context of our Western culture. He said that it's the motivation behind an action that's the real measure of it, not its success or failure. He was really saying the same thing: non-attachment to the fruit of the action. What's the motive?

Everything rests on the tip of motivation. Beginning to see that and beginning to work with it, we realize something that must be so obvious: we can't control the outcome of our actions because outcomes are dependent on so many conditions—in ourselves, in other people, in the world. We can do our best, but what we can do is really purify our motivations. That's within our power. This understanding gives a very clear direction for how to live our lives in a way that's of value.

Then in my junior year, I was on the subway in New York—this was in 1964—and I met some people who were in one of the very early Peace Corps trainings. It was just starting, one of the very first groups. I started talking to them on the subway, then invited them back to my apartment. Suddenly the idea of the Peace Corps just captivated my mind. I was definitely ready for some adventure after these years of being in school, some way to get out and see the world. So I applied to go to East Africa. But some karma intervened and I was sent to Thailand instead. If not, we might be doing African drumming. But somehow you ended up having to come here and sit quietly watching your breath.

It was in Thailand that I had my first introduction to Buddhism. My first introduction was going to a famous temple in Bangkok, the Marble Temple, where an Indian and English monk were teaching a group for Westerners. I went, still very much in my philosophic mode—I actually went with a copy of Spinoza in my hand. He was my great hero in college. I was going to debate the monks. Of course, now I remember almost nothing of what Spinoza said. But I would go to these groups and ask so many questions that people stopped coming. I'm sure you've been in groups where there's this one obnoxious person and you just wish they'd shut up. Well, that was me.

Finally, one of the monks, I think out of some desperation, said, "Why don't you try meditating?" And again, here I was in the East, very young, about twenty years old. It was all very exotic to me. Nobody I knew had ever meditated. I didn't know what it was about. So I got all this paraphernalia together, sat down, set the alarm clock for five minutes. But something really important happened in those first five minutes. It was the understanding that there's a way to look in as well as a way to look out. This was revelatory, really. When you think of how we grow up in our culture, there's very little guidance in looking in. It's all about looking out. To see that there was a way, that there was actually a systematic way for looking in—that was really powerful. I was so excited by this, I started inviting my friends over to watch me meditate. They didn't come back very often. So that's when I decided to just start a center. Thank you all for coming.

During my second year in the Peace Corps—it's a two-year volunteer time—I was teaching English at a school, but I decided to undertake a project I had wanted to do in college but never had the time for: to read Marcel Proust's great masterpiece, *A Remembrance of Things Past*. It's perhaps two thousand pages, a very long book with very long sentences. And it's all about time. Proust had a kind of—I don't know if you would call it mystical, but certainly transforming—experience which prompted the book. He smelled a madeleine, a French pastry, and as an adult passing by a shop, that smell called back time, all the memories of his childhood. The book is an exploration of what this means. And in the last fifty pages, there's really quite an interesting exploration about the nature of time.

But then I'd be walking down some dark Bangkok streets at night and fear would arise. Something's still here. So that kind of illuminated the situation. And I slowly started to realize that this experience was not the end of the spiritual path. It was actually the beginning of the spiritual path.

Experiences like this—people have different kinds, different levels of intensity, different levels of transformation—but all kinds of openings like this really are intimations of possibilities. They represent, or they are, the transforming experience of what's possible, not some final accomplishment.

I think this is such an important point on our spiritual journeys, because at different times in our practice, we may have real transforming moments of understanding where something radically shifts. And in the moment of recognition, just after such an experience, the mind can easily get seduced by thoughts like "Maybe I'm enlightened. Maybe I'm all done." There's no self, there's no me, there's no one there. But then life continues, and we see that something's still here—old patterns, reactive emotions, fear.

So I want to emphasize this distinction between opening experiences and the actual work of transformation. When we look into our own mind, when we touch something of that unborn, unformed nature, it can be tremendously powerful and disorienting. The phrase that kept coming into my mind was "there's no me, there's no me"—from the perspective of non-arising, non-occurrence. This was extremely disorienting. I was just sitting in my friend's garden, listening to this text, and all of a sudden there was this huge seismic shift.

I was about to leave Thailand after being there for two years, so things were already very unsettled. I didn't have any context for understanding the experience or what had happened. But I knew that in some fundamental way, something had shifted there.

It's important to see it in the correct way.

This is from an 11th century Korean Zen master named Chinul. He was in many ways one of the founders of Korean Zen. The framework of his teaching is called Sudden Awakening, Gradual Cultivation. There are some wonderful books of his teaching, and I very much appreciate that framework because it acknowledges the power of those moments of sudden awakening while also reminding us that gradual cultivation is needed. It's not the end of the path.

This is what he says: "Although coming into this life we may suddenly awaken to the fact that our self-nature is originally void and calm and no different from that of the Buddhas, old habits are difficult to eliminate completely. Consequently, when we come into contact with either favorable or adverse objects, then anger and happiness blaze forth. Adventitious defilements are no different from before. Nevertheless, although you must cultivate further, you have already awakened suddenly to the fact that deluded thoughts are originally void and the mind nature is originally pure."

I find that a very good framework for understanding—that we can have transforming insights into the empty nature of phenomena and still appreciate the fact there's a lot more work to do.

So I came back from the Peace Corps, came back to the States, profoundly moved by what had happened. And of course, I tried to repeat the experience. I would ask people to read the text to me again, and I would sit and look into my own mind—okay, unborn, unformed—and I'd be waiting. Clearly that was not the right approach.

I saw that I needed a teacher. And so I became motivated to go back to Asia to look for a teacher and really find a meditation practice that both expressed and deepened this understanding.

I went to India, first thinking I'd go back to Thailand, but stopping in India on the way. After a lot of searching around, I ended up in Bodh Gaya, which is of course the place of the Buddha's enlightenment—a very special place. At that time, this was in 1967, there were very few Westerners there, just a handful, four or five, staying at this place called the Burmese Vihara. I met some Westerners there who were studying with a teacher named Munindraji. They took me to meet him, and I began practicing with him.

When I first met him, and even as I got to know him very well over many years, he did not fit my idea of a guru at all. He was this very speedy little guy running around the bazaar. He just didn't have what I thought was the gravitas of some great enlightened being. Of course, this was a great teaching in itself—to cut through attachments I had to concepts of how wisdom should manifest.

One of his teachings that has remained in my mind: one time he was in the bazaar in Bodh Gaya, just haggling and bargaining for a little bag of peanuts, which of course is customary in India. But I was there studying to be enlightened. He was my teacher. And I said, "Munindraji, what are you doing? You're bargaining over five cents worth of peanuts."

And he said, "The path of the Dharma is to be simple, not to be a simpleton." And he went right on bargaining.

He was so engaged with the world, so interested in everything. He was incredibly open-minded. Over those years, as more Westerners would come and be interested in studying with different teachers and different traditions, he always encouraged people to explore whatever they wanted to explore.

One of the lines I remember him saying, which certainly rings true, was: "Go, explore, because the Dharma doesn't suffer in comparison to anything." His faith in the Dharma—the confidence and the appreciation of the teachings—was so complete. And that was a beautiful teaching because it inculcated that sense of openness. We don't have to hold on to our practice with fear or trying to be protective. There can be a very open-hearted sense of exploration of the world, of our lives.

The practice is so simple, as I hope you are getting a sense of by now. It's simply to be aware of what's arising and not to cling to it.

Has anybody not gotten that? I mean, what could be simpler? Be aware of what's arising and don't cling.

One of the things I very much appreciated about that first introduction with Munindraji is that there was no form, there was nothing to join. All he said when I came was, "If you want to understand your mind, sit down and observe it." It seems so simple and so common sense. How else can we understand our minds except by looking in, except by observing them?

So I moved into the Burmese Vihara in Bodh Gaya and spent a good part of the next seven years there.

Now, in the Visuddhimagga, the Path of Purification—that great classical commentary—it lists all the attributes of a conducive place to meditate. The Burmese Vihara had none of them. It was right on the main road between Gaya and Bodh Gaya, so trucks and buses would be going by all the time. Directly across from it was a public water tap, and people would be coming there to wash, to do their laundry, to talk. We were surrounded by small Indian villages, which, as many of you who have been in Asia know, are often playing music over loudspeakers. So all of this was going on.

In India, they have rope beds—a wooden frame with a weaving of rope. They're actually quite comfortable, except that the bed was about five feet long. So that was a little problematic, hanging over the hard wooden end of it. And the first year I was so naive in the ways of India, I didn't even know about mosquito nets. Of course, there are a lot of mosquitoes. So I'm sleeping on this five-foot-long rope bed, no mosquito net, kind of wrapped up in towels and such. The food was really poor, really poor.

But with all of this, with all of these conditions, which were exactly opposite to what makes for a conducive place to practice, I felt such immense gratitude for having a place to practice, for being in a place that honored practice. It felt like a deva world to me, just because of that. In the midst of the craziness of the world, here was a situation where people were honoring this journey of looking inward, of just sitting and walking and sitting and walking.

As I began my practice, concentration did not come easily at all. I'm not one of those people—there are a few, there aren't many, but there are some—who sit down and just due to past parami, their minds settle into easy and deep concentration. I was not like that. My mind basically wandered the whole time. I would just be sitting and thinking. And it was kind of fun. I was enjoying my thoughts. And the hour went quickly. I would think, "Oh, that was kind of a nice sitting." It took a long time for the mind to begin to quiet down.

Also, I was not at all used to sitting cross-legged. It was incredibly painful. I basically couldn't sit cross-legged for more than five minutes. The pain was just too intense. So I sat in a chair, but I'm pretty tall, so most chairs are not that comfortable anyway. So I put the chair on bricks. I put each leg on four bricks. It was kind of a big wicker chair on the bricks, and then I put cushions on the chair, and then I put my mosquito net over it. So it was like sitting on this great throne—a combination throne and shoeshine box. That's what it looked like. And it was a little embarrassing when Munindraji would come in.

But it worked. It worked. So it reinforced my very pragmatic approach to practice. The posture really doesn't matter if we have that interest and commitment to sit in some posture where we can be pretty still and observe and look.

When I left Bodh Gaya for the first time—the very first time I was just there for six weeks, and I had to come back to the States and then went back to India a few months later—Munindra said something which Patricia mentioned the other night, and I wanted to reiterate. Even though at the time, when I was pulling away in the rickshaw and Munindra said this, it sounded a bit like a cliché to me, over the years I have so come to appreciate the depth of meaning.

He said as I was pulling away, "The Dharma protects those who protect the Dharma."

I think we really want to let that in, because it has such powerful implications for how we live our lives. The Dharma protects those who protect the Dharma. It doesn't mean that unpleasant things don't happen in our lives—of course they're going to happen. What it does mean is that as we protect the Dharma, it protects us from excessive greed, excessive hatred, excessive delusion, excessive fear, because we know how to see it, we know how to recognize it, we know how to work with it. We know to some extent what renunciation means, what letting go means. The Dharma protects those who protect the Dharma.

I spent most of those seven years in India, though I came back and forth several times to the States, mostly to work and make some money to go back. The first few times of coming back were very difficult—that transition time. Some of you are going into a transition time now. For me, coming back from India, not only was it a transition from intensive practice to more engagement in the world, it was also the transition from the simplicity of India to being in America. In some ways that was even harder. Basically what I did those first couple of times was sit around listening to Bob Dylan, doing other things one did in the sixties, feeling depressed. But then I'd go back to India and get all energized by my practice again. And then sometime I'd have to come back.

What was interesting is that after doing this for a few times, back and forth, the transitions became much easier. I really began to see and understand those times of change as being as much of the practice as being on an intensive retreat. It's just another form. Other things are happening.

So it's really important, especially for those of you who will be leaving, to understand that the retreat does not end. It never ends. Sorry. The Dharma is our life, and it doesn't make sense to be committed to awakening on retreat and somehow let that go when we leave. What's that about? It's really important to see all these times of transition and change—change of form and activity—as fruitful for Dharma practice as this has been. It's important to see it and hold it and explore that, even if the first few times of transition are difficult, and they might well be.

On one of my trips back, I saw a movie called *Charly*. I don't know if any of you saw it. It was based on a short story called *Flowers for Algernon*. Not to go into the whole story of the movie, but in it there were a few scenes where they showed people being cruel to somebody who was mentally challenged. I saw that—again, this was in the context of this long period of intensive practice—and just the cruelty of it somehow touched my heart. I was seeing my own potential for that kind of cruelty.

When I went back to India, I told Munindra-ji, "I really want to do some mettā practice. I really want to develop that quality of mettā, because seeing that cruelty was so painful."

This was my first experience of an intensive period of mettā. It took quite a while to get into it, but after about a month or so of doing it intensively, it really was the first experience of my mind getting quite concentrated. And then with the mettā came tremendous feelings of happiness. It was just wonderful. I thought, "Great, this is how my life is going to be." I really thought that. I thought, "Okay, this is it."

But then, of course, conditions changed. There was a really important lesson in this, which hopefully we're all learning: the nature of the spiritual path is not about simply hanging out in blissful states. That's not what it's about. It's about opening to that, certainly, but also exploring the shadow sides of our minds, really seeing the unwholesome parts of our minds.

In doing the brahmavihāras, you may have noticed at times that we can be doing mettā or compassion or any one of them, and very often it calls up its opposite. We're doing mettā and all of a sudden there's a wave of ill will. This is the purifying process. This is not a mistake.

I had a very striking example of that during this time. Again, this was my first experience of mettā practice. I was sitting there, getting very concentrated and blissful. At that time I was in a room in the Burmese Vihara. It was an inside room, and there was a windowsill on the outside of the room but off a corridor.

And I would sometimes leave pieces of fruit on that windowsill outside in the corridor. There was a Nepali man who was a student of Munindra-ji's who had come to practice during that time, and he had a little servant boy with him.

So I'm sitting there, really very expansive, in quite a lot of bliss. *May all beings be happy. May all beings be peaceful, be free.* Then I hear this little rustling outside my window, and just the thought that comes into my mind: "That little Nepali kid is stealing my fruit." *May all beings be happy. May all beings be liberated.*

The contrast was so amazingly blatant. Even in the midst of all of our metta, very often it just touches the other side and we see the defilements arise.

One of the powers of doing the Brahma Viharas—having done them and then going out into the world—is that the practice illuminates times when we're feeling its opposite. When we spend so much time doing metta or compassion and then we're in some situation in the world where there's real ill will or cruelty or whatever it may be, having done the practice, it shines a spotlight on it. We see so clearly that unwholesome mind state in contrast to what we've practiced.

And so it's a great gift. It's not that the unwholesome things are going to stop arising—at least probably for a while. They will keep arising, but we see them. And we see that there's another possibility.

One last Munindra story, which was such a good teaching. I would be sitting there—by now I'd been there for quite a long time, over a number of years. The concentration had finally deepened, the practice was going well, and I'd be sitting for long hours.

But Munindra-ji had the habit of bringing any Western traveler who came to Bodh Gaya to come meet Joseph. Just to chit-chat. Munindra would meet them in the bazaar while he was haggling for peanuts—you know, I was there in the vihara doing my practice—and he would just drag all these people along. "Oh, come meet Joseph."

It got to a point where I just dreaded hearing his footsteps. This is my teacher, and I'm thinking, "Please, let it not be Munindra-ji." But it always was. He was always dragging somebody along.

So I would just have to get up from these states of really deep stillness and chat. At first I was terribly annoyed and irritated, and of course then my practice would be terribly annoyed and irritated. But he kept doing it. He didn't stop.

So at a certain point I just had to give up. And I realized something very significant: it didn't matter at all. If I stopped resisting it, I was sitting in a really quiet space, a calm space. Somebody comes—get up, talk to them. If I'm not making a problem in my mind, it's fine. That happens, they leave, go back to sitting. Not an interruption at all.

So that was really a great lesson in how we can hold on so tightly to protecting our space, and that itself can become its own hindrance. It's not that we don't look for conducive surroundings—that's always helpful. But can we stay open just to what comes in the course of that time?

Freedom is all about our own minds. It's not about external conditions. I think we need to hear that a hundred thousand times.

Because the tendency so often is to think, "Oh, if the conditions were different, then I could get on with my practice." It's not about that. So we learn. We just learn.

Over the years—I first went to India about forty years ago—I've had the chance to study and practice with quite a few different teachers, some in the same tradition, some in different traditions. This gave me a great appreciation for the incredible richness of the Dharma. The Buddhist teachings are so vast and so deep and can be approached from so many different sides and angles and methodologies.

And in that, we all find our own way. For some people, it makes perfect sense to find a method that works for them and to stay with it. If that's the way that works, that's great. For other people, it may be helpful to understand different approaches. There's no right or wrong—it's just what's helpful for each one of us on our path at any particular time.

I see the Dharma as this wonderfully rich mandala of understanding. All of the different traditions and teachers and methods, and even qualities within a tradition that we're practicing—the Brahma Viharas or concentration or mindfulness or equanimity, whatever it is—all of these different aspects of the Dharma are just another piece of the mandala. We have this incredible good fortune of being in a situation where so much is available to us. So we find our way in that and appreciate the possibilities of developing all these many sides of ourselves.

To get into a sectarian attachment to a particular way, a particular method—even if it's a very good method that leads all the way to awakening—there's no need for the sectarian attachment. We can really honor and respect all the many ways of Dharma practice.

One of Munindraji's greatest students was Dipa Ma. I think we've spoken over these weeks about this extraordinary woman who was a student of his in Burma and then came back to live in Calcutta. In some way, of all the teachers I've had, she was really the person who inspired me the most in terms of the potential for what a heart and mind can be. Because in her extraordinary development, there was this rare combination of the deepest and most profound stillness and the most all-embracing love. That combination was just incredible to be in the presence of. When she would give a blessing, running her hands over your head and shoulders and back, it was like being bathed in love and wisdom. So tremendously inspiring to see that as a potential—yes, this is what the mind can become with practice, with training.

She could also be pretty demanding. She had a very high bar. One time I was with her and she said, "Joseph, I think you should sit for two days." She didn't mean a two-day retreat. She meant sit down and get up two days later, which she had done. I just started laughing—it just seemed impossible. And she just turned to me and said, "Don't be lazy."

Well, I never did quite reach that level of accomplishment. But it was, again, very inspiring—so many things are possible. Through the cultivation of mind, the mind can become so powerful and so loving and so still. She was a great example.

After some years, I also started practicing with another great teacher in India, Goenkaji. He was teaching another form of Vipassana, this body sweeping, a very powerful technique—a very concentrating technique. But he was very different than Munindraji. Munindraji was completely informal, and Goenkaji was pretty formal. He was the first one that I knew of who actually created the form of a ten-day retreat. Maybe there had been others, but this was the first time I had experienced that. He was very methodical in the teaching, with a very powerful presence and beautiful, wonderful chanting. He would chant in the hall, and there was just this amazing sense of devotion.

When I first sat a course with him, he would come in and people would bow to him. With Munindraji, people never bowed. So I said, "What's this bowing?" I didn't get it, and my mind was pretty judgmental about what all that was about. Quite amazingly, by the end of the first ten-day retreat, I understood why people were bowing. It was a good lesson both in my own comparing, judgmental mind and then really opening to that quality, that very beautiful heart quality of devotion, of faith.

When that devotion is there genuinely, coming from the inside rather than imposed from the outside, then bowing becomes a beautiful expression of that quality.

I want to end with a question that somebody recently asked me. After all these years of practice and teaching, they asked what inspires me the most and what brings me the most joy.

When I thought about the question, I saw there were two interrelated aspects of the Dharma that highlight what I value the most and what really brings the most happiness.

The first is something I mentioned earlier: understanding the possibility, the potential, and the practice of purifying our motivations—realizing that we don't have to stay lost and imprisoned in our habitual tendencies. There is a tremendous joy in seeing through the different defilements that arise in the mind. They're going to come for quite a long time. Until we're fully awakened, different defilements will arise. But to have the understanding and the confidence that we can actually purify our motivations—that we don't have to stay trapped and imprisoned by habitual tendencies, that we can see through them, let them go, recognize the empty nature of awareness—this is the first thing that really inspires me.

Every time I see a defilement in the mind clearly, in a very strange way, it makes me happy. It really makes me happy because I would much rather see it than not see it. There's that recognition: "Oh good, ill will"—or whatever it is.

The second source of wonder in the Dharma is the growing experience that all of the brahmaviharas—mettā, compassion, joy, equanimity—are the expression of emptiness. The more we realize the selfless nature of experience, the more that wisdom grows, and we see that love and compassion and joy and equanimity are the activity of that wisdom. We see them as the natural expression of selflessness.

This is a great understanding of the mandala of the Dharma. They're not two different things. The more we understand selflessness, the more love and compassion become the way we engage with the world. This is a beautiful unfolding in our lives. We understand in an increasingly deep way that our practice is not for ourselves alone—that we can undertake this practice with the motivation, right up front, that all the effort we make, everything we do, can be with the aspiration that it be for the benefit, the welfare, the happiness, and the liberation of all beings.

I'd like to close with a wonderful teaching of the Dalai Lama. He calls it the true meaning of life:

"We are visitors on this planet. We are here for ninety or one hundred years at the very most. During that period, we must try to do something good and something useful with our lives. If you contribute to other people's happiness, you will find the true goal and the true meaning of life."

May the merit of all our practice together be joined with the merit of all the wholesome actions of the three times—past, present, and future. And may all of it together be dedicated to the welfare, the happiness, and the awakening of all beings.

CHAPTER 25

Right Attitude

Guy Armstrong · 31 min

In this talk from the three-month retreat at IMS, Guy Armstrong presents a practical framework for understanding right attitude (sammā saṅkappa) as the foundation of meditation practice. He suggests that how we approach our practice matters more than which technique we employ, and offers a simple method for ongoing investigation: asking whether we are wanting something to happen, resisting what is happening, or not knowing what is happening—corresponding to greed, aversion, and delusion.

Armstrong explores the delicate balance between dhammachanda (wholesome desire for awakening) and the problematic striving that creates tension in practice. Drawing on the threefold instruction to "relax, observe, and accept," he emphasizes that relaxation is not a distant goal but the starting point of each sitting. The quality of saddhā (faith or trust) emerges naturally when we recognize that this moment is "good enough" as it is. Through mindfulness, we observe experience without analysis, opening the door to wisdom and understanding.

The talk connects right attitude directly to the second factor of the Noble Eightfold Path and the three wholesome roots: non-greed (alobha), non-hatred (adosa), and non-delusion (amoha). Armstrong quotes Sāriputta's definition of nibbāna as the destruction of these three unwholesome roots, suggesting that moments of right attitude give us a taste of liberation itself. When path and goal begin to merge, we discover that freedom is not distant but available in each moment of unentangled knowing.

In many ways, discovering the quality of right attitude as you approach your meditation practice is more important than the particular meditation technique you end up working with, or the range of techniques you work with. So I want to talk this evening about this quality of right attitude—how to investigate it, how to learn about it as you go, in a really simple and practical way.

One of the traits of Buddhist meditation lineages is that they can lend themselves to a strong quality of striving. Throughout all the Buddhist traditions, there is this magnificent concept of enlightenment. Sometimes when people come into the actual practice, they become focused on this outcome in a rather exclusive way. That focus tends to dominate why we're here, why we're doing what we're doing, and influences every moment along the path. It's as though one had come in carrying a banner that says, "Enlightenment or Bust." And sometimes busting happens before enlightenment happens.

I have to say, without a certain amount of fire, the path doesn't unfold so well. A certain amount of this quality, which we might call *dhammachanda*, or a fervor for the Dharma and for discovery, really needs to be there. Yet if it's not balanced with a sense of patience and trust in the unfolding, it can make us really tight in practice. And then that doesn't help the flowering so much.

I've been subject to some of this myself. Living in California, one is obligated to try other approaches from time to time. About ten years ago, I went to a psychic in San Francisco who had gotten rave reviews from my friends. If you're in meditation circles in California, you're also in all these other circles. I went to see this man named Manfred—perhaps some of you know him. As soon as I walked through the door, he said, "Whoa. You're trying way too hard." I don't know if it was my aura or what. He said, "Don't you know that God more likely shows himself to people who don't want him too much?" I thought that was actually, for me, a very apt comment. So I've had to work over the years of practice with a sense of striving, with a focus on the outcome, not to become fixated on the end result of practice.

On the other hand, if one lets go of that *dhammachanda*, that real fervor for the Dharma, then a meditation retreat can become too loose a place. Here you're very much on your own for a lot of the day, and someone might come into a retreat and say, "Oh, three good meals a day and a room of my own. I think I'll sleep for a week, and then if I have a single pain in my knee, I'll get up and leave the hall." Of course, it takes more determination than that to work with all the ups and downs of an intensive retreat.

Somewhere in the middle is a place where we can practice where we're really engaged and really motivated, but we're not putting extra pressure on ourselves. That kind of approach to meditation is what we're looking for in the quality of right attitude.

One Vipassana teacher summed up his approach to right attitude in three words. He said the key is to relax, observe, and accept. This is a very good reminder if you want to remember over and over the pointing of right attitude. These are three good words to bring to mind.

We begin with relaxation. Relaxation is not something that we come to after years and years of striving as a goal—we start with relaxation. I will encourage you all, and you'll probably hear it in the instructions many times: as you begin a period of sitting or as you begin a period of walking, see if you can find in your body and in your mind that quality of relaxation. It's not always easy, and you may not always be able to find it, but at least you can incline your practice in that direction.

One of Suzuki Roshi's early comments when he was teaching at San Francisco Zen Center was that we Westerners know how to relax our bodies, but we don't know how to relax our minds. That was one of the things his meditation was meant to teach.

When we relax our body at the beginning of a sitting, it sends a strong message to our brain, somehow to our subconscious, saying that I can relax here and now. Maybe it's through taking a few deep breaths. Maybe it's just through the sense of letting the mind fall into the body. We send the message to our whole nervous system that everything is okay, that it's safe to be calm, that nothing has to change, that things are all right just the way they are.

This is really the ground we want to have in our meditation—the sense that everything is okay the way it is, that the moment is fine the way it is. This is the basis for the quality of trust or faith. In Pali, the word is *saddhā*. It's the first of the five spiritual faculties. We begin with that sense that things are okay the way they are. We remember that they may not be perfect. They may not be exalted. But they may be good enough. In fact, maybe this moment is good enough the way it is. And that means good enough is a basis for us to start meditating.

So the second piece of meditation in this threefold description is observe. Once we're in the place of relaxation, then we simply want to notice: What's happening? And if we can notice what's happening, we're meditating.

This is the activity of waking up. In this moment, we want to be awake. This means that we're not particularly trying to figure out what's happening to us. We're not thinking about the past or the future. We're not trying to analyze how it came about that our stomach feels a certain way this morning. We're just observing. We're just noticing what the expression of life is in this moment.

And of course, this is the activity of mindfulness. Whether we're observing our breath, our body, emotions, sounds, passing thoughts, or visual sights is not so important. What's important is that awake quality of knowing this present moment.

The beauty of observing is that it starts to open the door to understanding. Another way to say it is that mindfulness is the entry point for wisdom. As we start to see the way things come and go, the way things arise and pass in our body, in our mind, in the external environment—and we look closely—we start to learn the laws of nature. We start to learn the laws of the Dharma. And the only way to become free is to understand the way our own mind works.

So this quality of close observation is the first step to understanding. And in Buddhism generally, understanding is the highest value. It's only understanding that can lead to freedom and the end of suffering. This observation, the quality of mindfulness, is the direct route to understanding.

Then the third part is acceptance. This links back into relaxation, and it says: Whatever's happening in my mind and body and in the environment right now, I accept it. I don't struggle with it. I don't fight. I'm not in conflict. I can find inner peace right here and right now through this quality of acceptance.

And as you know, that's not easy to do. There are so many times that we don't want what's happening to be happening. We want something else to be happening. And so we go back and forth—accepting and opening, and then it's not quite right. This is where, again, we can watch the attitude, the play of attitude. The attitude of acceptance brings us into peace. The attitude of non-acceptance, of wanting something else, brings us into conflict, and suffering is born.

Sally and Sharda and I flew here yesterday and got in last night, and Sally and I brought our cat with us. Our cat is sixteen years old and had brain surgery last year, so we didn't feel that we wanted to leave her with a house sitter who didn't know her. We brought the cat, and IMS graciously offered to put her up along with us here.

I don't know if you've taken a pet on an airplane, but it's not a pleasant ordeal for the animal. We had her in a carrier, and she was squawking the whole time—going through check-in, going through security, lining up at boarding for the airplane. When we got on the plane, we put her under the seat in front of us, and she just kept squawking the whole time.

Once we got in the air, we took her out of the carrier, held her on our laps, and she calmed right down. She went to sleep and was just very mellow for most of the journey.

Then partway across the country—I don't know, it was probably around Chicago or something—a flight attendant came down the aisle and said, "I'm sorry, but FAA regulations do not allow pets to be outside of their carrier. You're going to have to put her back in her carrier right now."

So I saw my mind start to go back and forth between acceptance and fighting. Acceptance and fighting. We had a few words of discussion, and then Sharda kindly picked the discussion up and took it further with her. At one point I remember Sharda saying, "So now you've told us the FAA regulation, it's up to us to make our choice."

The flight attendant said, "It is definitely not up to you to make your choice. You have to comply with the FAA regulation."

Here I'm going, wait a minute—this doesn't make sense. She's on our lap. She's not disturbing anybody. She's really happy. She's not crying. She's going to sleep.

If we put her back in her carrier, she's going to start squawking and everybody else is going to get upset. But you know how there are some people whose mind is all about the regulation, and the specific situation really doesn't matter? This was one of those people.

So in the end, I could either feel angry and upset with her—which I did—or I could feel understanding that this is simply the way her mind relates to regulation. And I couldn't argue, because it's also an article of law that you have to obey the flight attendants. If I resist, I could be arrested in Boston, and I wouldn't be here with you tonight. So I thought, it's probably better if I'm with you tonight.

We put the cat back in the carrier, and she squawked for the whole rest of the journey. She cried, and everybody around could hear her. In fact, a woman a few aisles back said, "Yeah, I heard your cat crying toward the end of the trip."

But for me, the interesting thing was—apart from caring about her experience—watching my mind go back and forth between resistance and judgment, understanding and compassion. Resistance and understanding. I wanted to argue, and then the other side would come up, and I just couldn't take it any further.

So often this same dynamic happens in relation to body pain or knee pain or an unpleasant emotion. We can open to it for a moment and really accept it and feel it and understand it, and then it persists and we're back in resistance. It's a very interesting place to observe: where is there suffering and where is there peace or ease? You can examine this on an ongoing basis.

We start to see that we have in all our human minds a very deeply conditioned habit of making things right—in fact, of making things perfect in the moment, because we don't want anything to be painful. This human tendency to constantly keep adjusting ourselves and the environment to make it just right is described by the Tibetans as the essence of samsara. They say the very essence of the mental movement that keeps us on the wheel—being born and dying, arising into suffering over and over and over—is the act of correcting.

This is a very profound statement, pointing to this movement of acceptance. And you could say that the whole of our practice is noticing this quality moment after moment after moment.

So how do we correct? There are two fundamental ways, of course, which you know. One is we try to make things pleasant, and the second is we try to make the unpleasant disappear. One expresses itself through the activity of greed or wanting things a certain way. And the flip side of that coin is wanting to push away the things that don't conform to that—the fundamental movements of liking and disliking.

If we look for the phrase "right attitude" in the teachings of the Buddha, the place it seems most closely linked is in the second factor of the Eightfold Path: sammā saṅkappa. This is often translated as "right thought" or "right intention," but I think "right attitude" is also a valid aspect of sammā saṅkappa.

Right intention is defined in the suttas as the intention of renunciation, of non-ill will, of non-cruelty.

Take a look at renunciation. A synonym often used by the Buddha is relinquishment. Renunciation and relinquishment point to the same thing—basically, in our modern vernacular, letting go. Letting go of something we would want to hold on to. Generosity is another expression of this same movement; generosity is a form of relinquishment or letting go also. So the first intention is letting go of what is pleasant, appealing, lovely, desirable.

The second and third aspects—non-ill will and non-cruelty—are both expressions of the mind state of aversion, stated in the negative. Non-ill will is the expression of mettā. Non-cruelty is the expression of compassion. These basically point to mettā and compassion, summing up the intention not to react with aversion.

So the heart of right intention is not being greedy and not being aversive.

If you want to refine it a little more, when the Buddha talks about action and kamma, he speaks of the roots of what's wholesome and the roots of what's unwholesome. He says: What is the root of the wholesome? Non-greed is a root of the wholesome. Non-hate is a root of the wholesome. Non-delusion is a root of the wholesome.

When you put these together, it basically restates non-greed and non-aversion, adding non-delusion. These three together can become the core of how we look at right attitude.

And I want to suggest that there's a really simple way to apply this teaching in any moment of your meditation practice.

If you're sitting, walking, in the dining room, wherever you are, you can check your mental attitude by asking three questions: Am I wanting something to happen? Am I resisting something that's happening? Am I not knowing what's happening?

If the answer to the first question is yes—bingo, you've got greed. If you're resisting something that's happening, that is aversion. If you're not knowing what's happening, that is delusion. So if any of these three are in play, then our mind is not quite in the optimal attitude for meditation.

It becomes very interesting to explore in an ongoing way these qualities of greed, aversion, and delusion. And again, I would just keep it really simple: Do I want something to happen? Am I resisting something? Am I not knowing what's happening?

Transition times in retreats are very interesting times to watch these formations. As you go into the dining room tonight, for those of you who've been continuing, were there any thoughts of, "Wow, it's really getting crowded in here?" Were there any thoughts of, "Why are these new people so noisy?" Were there any thoughts of, "Why didn't they serve tonight what they served last night?" Were there any thoughts of, "Oh, the room's too hot or too cold?" These are subtle or not so subtle movements of liking and disliking. And in any moment we can wake up—our thoughts are telling us what's happening—we can wake up to the presence of these.

If you just came in from outside, also a lot of thoughts usually get activated coming into a new retreat situation. Where's my room? Is it in a quiet part of the building, or am I right next to the stairs or right next to the showers? Is there enough time after the work period for me to get in a shower before the first morning sitting? Is there anybody really cute on this retreat? I'll check it out as soon as I get in the hall. What's my yogi job? Do I like it? Do I not like it? All the questions are kind of around: this is a new place, is it going to be okay for me? Checking out whether I'm going to be safe here, whether I'm going to find my way. Plenty of opportunity for liking and disliking.

And then if we don't notice those movements of liking and disliking, then we're missing something. We're missing what's happening, and delusion is present. So if we're not knowing what's happening, we can come back into the present moment really quickly. Just notice something that's happening—it could be a breath, a sound, a sensation, an emotion, a thought, a visual sight. Just notice what's happening. Then you're in touch with the present moment.

If you notice that there's greed, then see if it can be released and move into acceptance. If you notice there's aversion, see if it can be released and move into acceptance. Sometimes it can and sometimes it can't. But be aware that if the mind is caught in one of these reactions, the meditation will not be as clear as it could be because the mind is clouded by that reactive formation.

For those of you who've been practicing for a while, of course the desires and aversions get more subtle. They start to relate more to the meditation itself. There's a longing for repeating a very still and present sitting. There's a yearning for states of concentration or the absence of thought. And you can feel this in your body at times. It feels like the body can't settle in a relaxed way to the present moment because there's a straining for something else. You may not even know what it is, but you can feel how the body is lifting up, moving towards something else. And often it's a memory of some beautiful meditation state—some peace, some love, some rapture that we want to have again.

So we tune into the movement of greed even as it relates to very refined states that we touch. And it's a good recollection that, as one teacher said, we're not practicing to try to stop thinking. First, because it's impossible.

We can't do it, so that will be frustrating. But we're practicing so that we know our thoughts when they're there. Oftentimes, part of the striving in meditation is we want to stop thoughts from coming because we love peace. But now we're clinging. We're attached. We're trying to recreate something. So we need to accept just the way things are. If thoughts are present, what are they? Observe the thoughts just as easily as you would observe the breath.

But suppose I look and I'm not wanting something particular to happen. I'm not resisting what's happening, and I'm in touch with what's happening in the present moment. This is the expression of non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion. This is the expression of a very wholesome state of mind, and it's from this wholesome, clear, unbiased view that we can best see things the way they are, the way things really happen in our experience.

One teacher described this kind of right attitude as an unentangled knowing. This is really what we're trying to set the conditions to unfold. And this is where the persistent looking at right attitude will lead you. As you examine the movements of wanting, of not wanting, of delusion, you'll find that they will be refined. They will diminish and sometimes fall away by that very examination.

So start to notice when you're in this place where the three are not present, and there truly is non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion. This experience is a kind of balance, a kind of contentment, and a clarity—an unentangled knowing. And then this can become more the reference point that the mind will guide itself back to again and again, a very fertile ground for insight.

Sariputta, one of the Buddha's chief disciples, was once asked, "What is nibbana?" He answered that it is the destruction of greed, the destruction of hatred, and the destruction of delusion. This is called nibbana.

I hope you notice that this is very close to the description of right attitude. The absence of greed, although not yet completely destroyed, the absence of hatred, and the absence of delusion, even though they're temporary, comes very close to the description of nibbana. What this says to me is that this right attitude, as we start to find it in our meditation experience—and it's never so far away, never that remote—starts to resemble very closely the very goal of the path that we're walking.

We don't have to wait for a hundred thousand lifetimes down the road to get a sense of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. We can find it now in this quality of right attitude, and it gives us a little bit of a taste of the very end of the path. For me, this becomes a really inspiring way to look at practice because the path and the goal start to merge. What I am heading for is not so different than the way I'm walking. The goal comes closer, the path rises to meet it, and we can abide in this kind of contentment and fulfillment, at least temporarily.

This is really what I wanted to say this evening on the subject of right attitude. You'll hear us talk a lot more about it as we go through the retreat. For now, I would encourage you to take up this investigation as something you direct the mind to regularly. Look at the presence of greed, aversion, or delusion, or the presence of non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion. And this will itself be the way to refine and develop the quality of right attitude.

Andrea will lead that sitting and the chanting of the sharing of blessings.

If you've just arrived and your body is tired, you have full permission to skip that sitting tonight. You can start tomorrow morning with the five o'clock wake-up and the five-thirty sit.

We look forward to seeing you at the first sitting after breakfast. Please rest well.

CHAPTER 26

What Are We Doing Here And Why?

Sally Armstrong · 53 min

> *In this welcome talk to three-month retreat practitioners, Sally Armstrong investigates the fundamental questions that underlie meditation practice. She distinguishes authentic mindfulness from its increasingly diluted popular usage, emphasizing that mindfulness is not merely being present—as illustrated through Oliver Sacks' poignant account of a man with severe amnesia who lived entirely in the moment yet experienced profound suffering without context or understanding.*
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> *Armstrong frames meditation as an exploration of conditioned arising (paṭicca samuppāda), the Buddha's central teaching that all experience arises through cause and effect. Through paying attention, we discover we're constantly making choices about what we attend to, and these choices shape our reality. She introduces Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu's perspective that the Buddha taught life skills—learning what is skillful and unskillful, what leads toward freedom and what perpetuates suffering.*
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> *The talk addresses how we habitually lose ourselves in brooding about the past or projecting into the future with hopes and fears, driven by the delusion that we can control outcomes. Armstrong points to acceptance as the antidote—a quality that encompasses equanimity, mettā, and patience. Drawing from Thich Nhat Hanh's 'The Miracle of Mindfulness,' she concludes that mindfulness is simultaneously means and end, seed and fruit—not a technique to achieve something later, but the very life of awareness that restores us to wholeness in each moment.*

I'd like to express my own welcome to you. It's always a shift for us coming into the three-month retreat. There's a lot of appreciation for those of you who have held this space, created this space for six weeks, and we feel like the new people, the new ones on the block. Then the shift happens when we begin to talk to you and put names to faces that are new, reconnect with old friends, and then speak to you in this way in the hall. I always enjoy getting over that little hurdle of feeling quite new here and then remembering what it's like to be here.

Thank you all for being here. I'm sure you're all very aware that you are part of something much greater than each individual one of you. As Joseph said last night, this course has been going on for thirty-three years. In the scheme of some things, that's not

a long time, but in the scheme of our lifetimes, I think for most of us, it is. It really represents something—the space that you all create here during the three-month retreat.

I've sat here many times myself, but when I don't sit here, I always know the day that the three-month course begins. I'm sure some of you do this too and think, "Oh, they're just starting to sit at IMS." And then after a while I think, "Oh, they're still sitting at IMS." And then much, much later I go, "They're still sitting at IMS." And at some point I think, "Oh, they've just finished." And all those people are coming out, back into the other reality, from an experience that's life-transforming.

So you are holding that space this year for all those people out there who think of you practicing here. For me, it was always inspiring to think of this many people wanting to practice in this way. Often I knew people who were here, and just to reconnect every now and then in my own daily sitting or at different times of the day and know that this was going on—I always like to think of that. You are holding something here that's really precious and inspiring for all those people out there who have either been here or would like to be here. Just to appreciate that.

But even saying how precious this is, I know that retreats aren't easy, whether it's your first full day or your fortieth day here. It's not easy doing this practice. It's challenging. It's tiring. We're required to give up an enormous amount to come here and practice in this way. Most of us come here with some intention of gaining more happiness, and then we discover: this is suffering. This is difficult.

But I think what's happening here is that meditation is a bit like a vaccination or like homeopathy, where you're given a little bit of what ails you, and that tincture is what's actually going to create the freedom or the happiness. But you have to take that in. You have to work with that difficulty or that suffering, and you probably sense this already. There's plenty of chance here to work with suffering—suffering of the mind, suffering of the body. That's what we do here.

But it's not about suffering. Of course, it's all about suffering. As the Buddha said again and again, "I teach suffering and the end of suffering." So that's what we're really here for.

I said something like this at the beginning of another retreat about how difficult retreats are, and I got this note the next day from a yogi. He said, "I'm having a great time. Am I doing something wrong?" So just know, if you are having a great time, no, you're

not doing anything wrong. It's great. But for a lot of us, there are challenges. Or we go through phases, of course, when it's difficult, when it's blissful. This is what happens on retreat.

For me personally, this retreat particularly marks a transition. I've been on sabbatical for about six months. I ended the dedicated practitioner program that Joseph mentioned last night in April of this year and took about six months off from doing a lot of teaching. I did teach one retreat in this time, but it's kind of interesting to take that much time away from doing this. I was doing my own practice, did some retreats, but I didn't do much teaching. I feel a bit rusty. It's like, what's going to come out when I sit up here and speak or when I speak to yogis? Luckily, it's a little bit like riding a bicycle—not completely, but I haven't forgotten. And it brings a kind of freshness.

to doing this, which I'm really appreciating. And it brings up this question for me, one I'm wanting to explore with you this evening because it's a really central question: What is it we're doing here? And more importantly, why?

If you haven't yet asked yourself this question, I think it's a good one to know some kind of answer to. It's not like there's one right answer, because it's always changing. But this is really central to our practice here. What is it that we're doing, and why?

My good friend Sylvia Boorstein, who I often teach with, really hones this point. She says about everything, "To what end? To what end am I doing this?" So to know for yourself a little bit about this, about why you're here—whether you've been here for many weeks or have just arrived—what is actually going on here?

Because there are obviously so many things we could do with our time, especially gathering this many people, all the energy it takes to put this kind of retreat on, and all the things you had to do to get here, to take care of in your life, to do this. When I was thinking about this, I thought, well, what are all the other things that people do that they deem really important? And what are we doing differently? People go to things like Star Trek conventions, or they reenact Civil War battles. Why do they do that?

But here we're doing something different. We're really looking to gain an understanding of nature—of our nature, of the nature of the mind and body—that will lead us to freedom, to greater happiness. So it's important to have some understanding, some sense of this big picture.

The simple thing we're doing here is practicing mindfulness. If someone was to ask you, "What are you doing here all these weeks?" you might say, "Well, I'm going to be practicing mindfulness." But even that—what does that actually mean? What is mindfulness?

As this term, this practice even, is becoming more mainstream—it's not quite mainstream yet, but it's getting there—you'll read that term in magazines about articles having nothing to do with meditation, people talking about being mindful of this and that. Now there's mindfulness-based therapy and mindfulness-based stress reduction, mindfulness-based yoga, and mindfulness being taught in businesses and corporations. It's really becoming much more commonplace. But in that, the understanding of what it is can get diluted, can get confused.

It used to be Zen that was the in thing, you know, ten, twenty years ago. That was the phrase being bandied around, especially "Zen and the art of." First it was archery, then *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, and people started to understand something—some very slim understanding of Zen. Zen art and Zen furnishing, things like that. And whenever this kind of thing happens, whenever the mainstream takes over something, it gets distorted.

So I looked up just today what there is now for "Zen and the art of." There was *Zen and the Art of Mindful Investing*, *Zen and the Art of Triathlons*—there were many of them. I just picked a couple on the first page or so. The last one I saw was *Zen and the Art of Ferrets*. So I hope we don't go that way with mindfulness, but you never know. Mindfulness and ferrets.

Here we're keeping it pretty simple. We're doing mindfulness-based mindfulness. It's not any of those other things. We're just keeping it simple.

I'm going to use a very simple definition of mindfulness to begin with: it's just the act or the process of knowing what's happening here and now in your direct experience. What's important in that is the knowing quality—that there is actually cognizance going on. But then there's the question of what are we being mindful of?

Again, it's an open question. We could choose any number of things to be mindful of. We could be mindful of the weather, of nature, of trees, of the clouds, of the movement of the air, the breeze, the wind. From all of these things we could learn something if we paid that kind of attention to them, and the Buddha often talked about how we can learn from nature. There's a lot we can learn.

But when we focus outwardly in that way, it's not ultimately liberating for us. What we need to do, what's important to do, is to pay attention in here—specifically to the mind, to our mind—because that's where we suffer, and that's where we can also find freedom and happiness.

So it's mindfulness particularly of getting to know the mind, of discovering, learning about, exploring all of the different manifestations of our minds, all of the different experiences that come up for us.

So just being in the moment, that's all it is. That's not all it is. He was in the moment. He knew this moment, but he had no context for understanding what was happening to him, where he was, who he was, who other people were. And there was that terrifying sense of lostness, of groundlessness—true groundlessness that wasn't a refuge at all.

It's very similar to what Guy was saying when I mentioned this article: that's what a description of the Bardo is like. That's a Tibetan understanding that between this life and the next life, we enter this in-between state where we're a disembodied consciousness floating around. And in that, we're completely fragmented because we have no refuge. We have no context for our experience and no continuity of the body. So it's very disorienting.

The other important aspect of mindfulness is that it's in this moment—being in the present moment. Again, another thing that's been taken into popular culture and bandied around a little, where everything is about being in the present moment, being here and now, "be here now" kind of thing. But this can get trivialized. People can misunderstand what the power of that is, because you can see that babies or animals are in the present moment. And there is a power and a beauty to that capacity they have, but what's missing is that knowing quality I just spoke about—or more specifically, wisdom, understanding. Just being in the moment isn't enough.

I recently read, in a New Yorker that came out in the last few weeks, this amazing story by Dr. Oliver Sacks. Many of you, I'm sure, have read his writings. He's a neuroscientist who writes these fascinating stories about people that have had some disruption of their mental functioning through accident or disease or by birth. What's interesting about them is he's always so compassionate and sympathetic to these people, but really writes in a way that points to the fact that the way we understand the world is only because of a biological process that is working in a certain way. You shift some little facet of it, and that reality can change quite dramatically. We think, "Oh, this is what reality is like for everyone." But you can see through his writings that this is not the case, and that other people can have a very different reality.

This particular story was called "The Abyss," and it was about a man who, through an infection of the brain, lost all short-term memory and most of his long-term memory. This is what he wrote about this man: "He was left with a memory span of only seconds—the most devastating case of amnesia ever recorded. New events and experiences were effaced almost instantly."

As his wife Deborah wrote in her 2005 memoir, *Forever Today*: "His ability to perceive what he saw and heard was unimpaired, but he did not seem to be able to retain any impression of anything for more than a blink. Indeed, if he did blink, his eyelids parted to reveal a new scene. The view before the blink was utterly forgotten. Each blink, each glance away and back, brought him an entirely new view. I tried to imagine how it was for him—something akin to a film with bad continuity. The glass half empty, then full. The cigarette suddenly longer. The actor's hair now tousled, now smooth. But this was real life, a room changing in ways that were physically impossible."

In addition to this inability to preserve new memories, Clive had retrograde amnesia—a deletion of virtually his entire past. So this is what he woke up to one day. She wrote about him: "It was as if every waking moment was the first waking moment. Clive was under the constant impression that he had just emerged from unconsciousness because he had no evidence in his own mind of ever being awake before."

And this is a quote from him: "I haven't heard anything, seen anything, touched anything, smelled anything. It's like being dead."

Desperate to hold on to something, to gain some purchase, Clive started to keep a journal—first on scraps of paper, then in a notebook. But his journal entries consisted essentially of the statements "I am awake" or "I am conscious," entered again and again every few minutes. He would write: "2:10 p.m.—this time properly awake. 2:14 p.m.—this time finally awake. 2:35 p.m.—this time completely awake," along with negations of these statements. "At 9:40 p.m., I awoke for the first time, despite my previous claims." This in turn was crossed out, followed by, "I was fully conscious at 10:35 p.m. and awake for the first time in many, many weeks." This in turn was cancelled out by the next entry.

This dreadful journal, almost void of any other content but these passionate assertions and denials, intending to affirm existence and continuity but forever contradicting them, was filled anew each day and soon mounted to hundreds of almost identical pages. It was a terrifying and poignant testament to Clive's mental state, his lostness in the years that followed his amnesia—a state that Deborah called "a never-ending agony."

It's amazing to think, when we speak so glibly of being in the moment, that this is what that can look like.

It's usually a state of a lot of fear. And all of us have probably had even moments of this. If you've ever woken up in a strange bed and you have that thought, "Where am I?"—and it's amazing how that sort of becomes "Who am I? What is the reality here?"

For most of us, we come quickly back together. "Oh, here I am. I'm in Barre in the fall teaching the three-month course." That's the strange bed I'm in. But it's very disorienting when we have that lostness, that not being able to know where we are.

So being in the moment isn't enough. It has to be held in a context where we understand what's happening to us. What is it we need to bring to our mindfulness, to being in the moment, that fills this in, that allows that process to actually lead to some deepening of wisdom or understanding?

First, I think, of course, it's the big picture—where I started. Why are we doing this? What is this all about? Why practice at all? To really begin with our intention, our motivation for practice that brought us here to retreat. And if you've been here for a while, it's something you need to keep renewing. You can't go on the fumes of some aspiration you had three months ago. To come here, this intention is central to keeping the practice alive. Whatever that might be for you—and I don't want to go into this a lot this evening—but just to raise it as a question that you yourself need to keep alive, keep the flame alive of. What are you here for?

The simple answers, the obvious answers people talk about: to be kinder to themselves or to others, to find more calm or peace, to reduce the suffering in life. And the big one of all: to find some degree of freedom, liberation, enlightenment, however you hold that. There's this great saying I've heard before: enlightenment is an accident, but retreats make us accident-prone.

But then the question is, why? Why does doing this make enlightenment more likely or possible? After a day of sitting and walking, you might look back and say, "What's that got to do with anything? Sure, I sat, I walked, I went here, I went there. How is that going to help me if I have this motivation, this aspiration to wake up, to be happier, more content, to find some degree of freedom in my life?"

Well, I think we all probably know and trust—you wouldn't be here if you didn't—this mysterious process of meditation. It isn't something that's immediately obvious. And certainly if someone from the outside were to come and look at what you did today, it would be a little mysterious, wouldn't it? "What are they doing all the time? Just sitting there, and then just walking to and fro—not even going anywhere. They're just walking to and fro. What's that got to do with anything?"

It is mysterious, but we have faith—or we grow in this faith—that something is being shifted here through this practice, through this paying of attention, on a subconscious level. It's not obvious to us, certainly not sitting by sitting, breath by breath, even day by day. You can't judge your practice or know what's really happening for you. But to have this faith or sense that it is shifting on this much deeper level.

A friend of ours, Stephen Batchelor, who's quite a famous Buddhist scholar, was just teaching a study retreat at Spirit Rock. He was actually teaching with his wife, Martine, and Sharda was also teaching with him. I didn't sit the retreat, but I went over a number of times to hear Stephen talk because he's always fascinating to hear and has usually got quite radical new ways of looking at both practice and the Buddha's teachings.

This was just a little aside that he made in answer to a question, but I thought it was quite interesting. He was responding to someone and he said—and he's very bright, one of the most learned people I know—"I would be reading a text and not able to understand head nor tail of it. Just, you know, it was like another language." He'd try reading it, and he'd read and read, and he'd have to just give up. Say, "I just don't understand this." Put it aside and not even think about it.

And he said what would often happen: he would come back years later, without having really thought about that text or had any particular relevant experiences related to it, pick it up again and read it. And he said it was like it was crystal clear. He couldn't understand how he didn't understand it before. But there was no way he could say, "Oh yes, because this shifted in me, or I understood this, or I read that and that helped." Some deeper process had been going on in his understanding that opened this text to him in a way it hadn't been opened before.

And this is a bit like what happens in meditation. It's much more mysterious than anything you can put your finger on, especially if you try to look at it in a small way from day to day. It's like the experience many of us have where you're hearing a Dharma talk or reading something, and you've heard it so many times before, and on the hundredth time you go, "Oh, *that's* what they mean when they say that." That recognition. Or often what also happens is someone will come and say, "You said this last night. Why didn't you tell us that before? That was so helpful." Well, I think we had said it before, but sometimes we're just not ready to hear it.

So we trust this process where something is deepening, even if what we're doing might not seem in and of itself that relevant to this bigger picture of waking up.

What happens on retreat is that our priorities get shifted. Whether we're aware of it or not, sometimes it is fairly conscious, but often it's just like someone changing the temperature of the water that we're sitting in—so slow we don't even notice. We go from always becoming, that sense of doing, to just being present, to just being. We go from complication to simplicity. Things get very simple here. What are you going to be doing tomorrow? Sitting and walking. When is lunch? Twelve or twelve-thirty. It's very simple here. Life out there is so complicated. We take all that away and move toward more and more simplicity.

We go from having lots of desires to still having lots of desires, but learning to let them go because there aren't so many ways to fulfill them here. So we learn that there's actually greater happiness to be found in letting go rather than running around crazily trying to fulfill them. And we go from aversion to acceptance.

There are many shifts like this. You probably have your own you could name that just happen gradually as we practice—without, as I said with Stephen, this big aha moment. Sometimes there is, and we see this process clearly. But it's only when you step back that you see, "Oh, right, I really let go here" or "Something shifted around this." So we change on these very profound and deep levels through this process, just of paying attention, just of being present.

Through this paying attention, what we see—if we look with this knowing, this wisdom that I spoke of, which is not being the wisest person on the planet or anything, but just the clarity of being willing to look and see what's actually here, what's going on in our experience—we begin to see that we're held in this web of cause and effect. Things happen for a reason.

What is actually going on when we pay attention in this way is that our meditation becomes like a huge experiment we're doing with our minds and our bodies. If I do this, I see this happens. When I pay attention in this way, that happens. What we're seeing is this very central teaching of the Buddha called conditioned arising, or dependent origination—paṭicca-samuppāda—which is quite a complex teaching. But in its essence, it's just this: conditionality. When this is like this, that is like that. When this arises, that arises. When this ceases, that ceases. And all the different variations and permutations of that.

This is all we need to know, in essence, for our meditation practice. As I said, there's a complicated wheel of twelve links of dependent origination. But just to see this causal nature of our experience can invite all kinds of new learnings for us.

The Buddha considered this teaching on dependent arising revolutionary. It was unique. He discovered it. He saw this connected reality that we all live in and how our actions have effects, have causes. We have this moment's experience, and then there's an effect that comes out of that movement.

Again, this is a complicated teaching I won't go into. But we don't need to understand it in its entirety. And certainly we can't figure it out, because it's not completely linear. It's not always A causes B, this always follows that. There are just these relationships where this experience, this way of being, conditions the next moment. It influences, it affects this next moment.

And we start to see this patterning. Through that, we can begin to notice what leads to more happiness and what leads to suffering. This is what is central to the Buddha's teachings—what develops wholesome qualities in us and what allows us to abandon unwholesome qualities or activities or actions. This whole realm is central to what we're learning here when we begin to pay attention.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu, who many of you may know, is an American man who's been an ordained bhikkhu monk for many years now. He has a monastery in San Diego and is a very prolific teacher and writer with lots of material available on the web—really good, practical writings. One of the central pieces of his teaching is all around this, and the words he likes to use are "skillful" and "unskillful." He says that what the Buddha was teaching are skills, life skills. Just like we can learn to play the piano or learn to be a good communicator or learn to be a carpenter, we can learn these life skills through this process of paying attention in this laboratory of our mind and body. We can begin to understand for ourselves what we need to do to increase freedom and happiness and decrease suffering and contraction through learning these skills—what's skillful and what's unskillful.

So this is the context within which we can begin to pay attention. We start to see that we're actually making choices all the time about what we pay attention to. I started talking about how it could be all sorts of things, but even within our internal experience we're making choices all the time. It's just that most of the time we're not aware we're making choices. We think we're on some preordained path. "I'm always like this," or "It's always like this for me here," or "I'm always this way in the morning," or "The two o'clock sit is always like this for me." We're actually making choices through what we're paying attention to in our perceptions, and that is what's conditioning our experience and therefore creating our worldview.

So again, mindfulness, by highlighting what we're actually paying attention to, can bring some wisdom into this. If we continually pay attention to what's difficult and challenging in our experience, what's likely to happen? We become grumpy, aversive, contracted. In saying this, it's not that we should deny difficulty. But when there's a whole range of experiences and all we keep going to is what's difficult or challenging, it's understandable that we're going to feel some sense of contraction or pain or disease about what's going on.

I always remember hearing about some yogi who said what meditation sometimes feels like is being on pain patrol—like, where's the next five-alarm fire that I need to go put out? And when one diminishes, I'm just on the lookout for the next one. When you're on pain patrol, all you see is pain because that's what you're looking for.

Consider the difference it makes if you start to focus on where the practice is going well. Or what's uplifting for the mind or heart. Or where can I find some ease or relaxation in this moment, even if there's difficulty or pain in the body? It's not to ignore or deny that reality, but just to recognize the power that our choices have, the power that our attention has.

This process of making choices is one of the things that can really get highlighted by paying attention. We often offer it as a whole meditation practice in itself, so we might talk about this as the days go by—just paying attention to intention and seeing what opens up for you out of that.

We pay attention in this moment because this is where we're actually living our lives—in this moment, not lost in the past. So much of our time is spent reminiscing, dwelling in regrets about all the past hurts and injustices and losses that we've all experienced. And again, not to say that we can't learn from the past. Often on retreat we can go through a sense of reviewing things that have happened, and there can be both real understanding and also letting go if that process can be worked through skillfully. But often that's not what's happening. We're really caught in something and just going around and around and around—stuck in these reminiscences, these longings, these regrets, this guilt or shame, however it might be manifesting for you.

There's a quote I want to read from a book I just finished called *Eat, Pray, Love*. If you've been out in the world at all, you can't avoid this book at the moment. Even if you don't want to read it, someone will thrust it in your hand and say, "Oh, you're a meditator. You have to read this book." That's what happened to me. I wasn't going to read it, but so many people were talking about it that I figured I had to. It's by Elizabeth Gilbert, and it's a story of three periods of her life. She takes a year where she spends a few months in Italy, and that's about eating and just the sensual pleasures. Then she goes to

India to an ashram where she meditates, and that's the "pray" part—really awakening her spiritual life. Then she goes to Bali, where her intention is to find balance between these two.

I enjoyed it. It's very funny, especially the time in India. She has some very insightful and humorous ways of talking about her meditation experience that I'm sure we can all relate to.

The next morning in meditation, all my caustic old hateful thoughts came up again. I'm starting to think of them as irritating telemarketers, always calling at the most inopportune moments.

You know how it is. You come into the hall thinking, "I'm just going to have this great sit. I'm peaceful. Everything's fine. The body's comfortable." And then up they dial—you know, the repeat dial—until you answer. And you always do. You always answer. That's when you need to just listen to the voice machine and say, "No, I'm not picking up that one." But we usually do.

What I'm alarmed to find in my meditation, she goes on to say, is that my mind is actually not that interesting a place after all. In actuality, I really only think about a few things, and I think about them constantly. I believe the official term is "brooding."

And we spend so much time doing that. Have you noticed? I remember on one retreat where I was so happy when my mind quieted down fairly quickly and just left behind the things of the world that I'd been dwelling on. How peaceful. But what I found quickly took its place were these ten things about the retreat. And all I would do is think about them. It didn't make a difference that it wasn't those things—it was these things. We just pick something up and go around and around. How many times do you have to think something to get whatever you're going to get from it? It's like wringing out a cloth, but we keep wringing and wringing. We brood over things.

So we get stuck in the past. But we can also brood about the future. We can project into the future with all of our hopes and fears. And when that gets exacerbated, it becomes longing and dread about what might happen next.

Hopes and fears doesn't sound too bad, but when you call it longing and dread—which is what it really is—can't you get a sense of what's happening there? It's this constant movement, wanting, not wanting, yes, no, yes, no. And it's debilitating. We get stuck in that place because it doesn't allow us—as we know, and I'm sure you've all heard this a million times—to be here now, where our life is actually being lived.

Part of this temptation to move into the future is the fantasy that I know I have, that many of you have, that we all have to some degree—the fantasy that we can control it in some way. That if we think about it enough, worry about it enough, move the pieces on the chessboard enough, it will turn out okay in the way that I want it to.

How many times have you had that idea and had it disproven? You want to venture into the thousands? And yet here we sit again, playing that out. "Oh, maybe this time. It's just because I didn't get it right before. Now I've learned from that past one. Now if I do it this way, or I'm a little different, or I'll try this strategy..." We have this complete fantasy, this delusion that I buy into again and again—that if I just get it right, that it's just because I haven't figured it out yet that I haven't been able to have everything turn out right in the future. So we keep believing this.

When we actually look at what's happening here, we can see all of what we call the kilesas, the defilements—greed, aversion, and delusion, these torments of mind. They're all at play in getting caught in future imaginings. There's the desire for it to be a certain way. There's the fear, the aversion, that it won't. And then obviously there's the delusion that we can actually control it in some way. It's just operating.

For me, it's helpful to unpack it a little. What's actually going on when I'm lost in these fantasies about the future? Even if it's just the fantasy of what's for lunch—which we can spend many hours wondering about when we start to smell the garlic being fried or whatever. On retreat, our future imaginings can get a little simpler and more local, but we're still involved in them. And we can't control what's for lunch.

So just to look at what it is. And then we judge ourselves because we haven't figured it out yet. There's something out there that would fix this for us. There's some experience or thing or person out there that would make it all okay. And the only problem is we haven't had it yet or found it yet or done it right.

Again, to really look at what are the beliefs that are underpinning this movement into the future that prevents us from just being with what is in its simple way. Because we're constantly disappointed because this thing isn't there. We think it's this, and it brings us a little happiness perhaps, but then we're on to the next thing. We're on to the next thing. We're trying to manipulate our experience to get it to be better—in the whole physical realm of sense pleasures, but of course here on retreat in the whole realm of our spiritual life. A better sitting, a better walking, to be wiser, to have something good to say in my next interview.

I remember being on a retreat where we had interviews every day, and you spend a big part of the day thinking, how can I package what happens so it looks good? Because I have to have something different to say. If I say the same thing, the teacher isn't going to be interested. So we try to work with it. We're always moving it about.

Being in the moment, all of this practice, as I said earlier, is about trusting and learning to let go. It's so hard. Again, from *Eat, Pray, Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert writes: "Letting go, of course, is a scary enterprise for those of us who believe that the world revolves only because it has a handle on the top, which we personally turn. And that if I were to drop this handle, even for a moment, well, that would be the end of the universe." If I wasn't there worrying and planning and strategizing, it would all fall apart. Just to really see, if you take this to the extremes, how deluded this is. And that recognition can bring us back to actually just being here for what is.

So we land in the present moment, hopefully with some wisdom, where we can see things as they are, see things clearly without these layers of projection. And this is where we come to what we call right attitude. Guy spoke last night quite beautifully about this and used these three words: relax, observe, accept. Really the heart of right attitude that brings us back from that sense that we can control or even need to control what's coming. We accept what is. We relax into the present moment and we know what's happening.

For me, the most important part of that phrase is the acceptance—just being okay with what is, even if it's not pleasant, even if it's not what you would wish for, even if it's not at all elevated or pleasing. It's what is.

Acceptance brings so many other beautiful qualities with it. Of course it's equanimity. It's a simple way of saying what we're experiencing is equanimity, what we're practicing is equanimity, allowing things to be just as they are. Acceptance is actually a facet of metta, of loving-kindness, that brahma-vihara that accepts ourselves and others and experience just as it is, just as they are, just as we are. That is what unconditional love is—acceptance, just as it is.

And it allows us to become mindful because it lets us see things just as they are. It allows us to see through that veil of our projections and our fantasies and our fears and our regrets and the avoidance of things. Acceptance allows the mindfulness to be fully connected so we can see the truth of things. Things can actually reveal themselves to us when we accept them because we're not resisting anything.

It's a huge support for patience, which is another quality that we need on retreat. As we make this aspiration, this intention to be present moment after moment, it needs this enormous well of patience. Just this is okay, and the next moment and the next moment.

I think acceptance is the huge antidote for all of the kilesas—the greed, aversion, and delusion I just spoke about. At the heart of the kilesas: wanting what we don't have, not wanting what we do have, and not knowing what's going on, not being clear or connected. These are the kilesas.

Again, from *Eat, Pray, Love*—I just read this book, so I got all these quotes out of it; I just finished it before I came on retreat—she said: "The yogic path is about disentangling the built-in glitches of the human condition, which I'm going to oversimply define here as the heartbreaking inability to sustain contentment."

I thought that was very insightful. Just a concise way of putting it: the heartbreaking inability to sustain contentment. Because contentment is so important. That's wanting what you have and not wanting what you don't have and knowing what's happening, being in the truth of the moment and knowing it for what it is. It sounds so simple, yet it's so difficult. We see the strength of the wanting mind that's always moving, always moving, with this thirsty nature, looking for the next thing that we think is going to satisfy it in some way.

And I think when we start to explore this nature of desire, it's really helpful to remove the object, whatever it is. The object isn't relevant. Just feel that desire, that discontentment for what it is. It's agitation. It's dis-ease.

Desire is very seductive because the object is out there holding this allure that it's going to give us what we want. But take the object away and just feel what's there—that leaning forward, that emptiness, that wanting. That's what's really at work here. That's what we're living in and out of when we don't see it.

So we allow things to be just as they are. We don't reject any part of our experience. We don't want what we don't have. We don't not want what we do have. We use mindfulness, this awareness of the present moment, to cultivate an attitude of acceptance—whatever it is, it's okay. We notice what's present, what's actually here in the mind and the body, without resistance, without judging, without aversion.

And we're willing to learn. We're willing to look at this process not in some isolated way, but in a context where we see what's being cultivated through our movements of mind—what leads us into more suffering, more contraction, more wanting, and what allows us to let go, to be more open and accepting.

This will change. There isn't a right way to meditate. There's no right way to be mindful. There's no one thing you need to learn. It's a process of constantly waking up and seeing what's here now for me, what's going on in the mind, in the body.

But in all this, don't get the sense that there's a lot of doing, that we're always vigilant and having to fix something or manipulate our experience. Really trust the wisdom that comes from this bare knowing. In some ways it's as simple as that. Joseph used this famous line: just sit and know you're sitting, and all of the Dharma will be revealed to you. We don't trust that. It seems like there should be more. And on one level, of course, there is more—we need to have a big picture of what practice is about. But at the simple, essential level of what our moment-to-moment experience is, this is it. To sit and be aware and awake and see what's happening.

I'll finish with a quote from Thich Nhat Hanh, from his book *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, where he gives his definition of what mindfulness actually is:

"Mindfulness is the miracle by which we master and restore ourselves. It is the miracle which can call back in a flash our dispersed mind and restore it to wholeness so that we can live each minute of life. Thus mindfulness is at the same time a means and an end, the seed and the fruit. Mindfulness itself is the life of awareness. Mindfulness enables us to live."

What's key in there is that it's a means and an end. We're not doing it to get something done, always projecting to the future. In and of itself, it provides that sense of wakefulness and freedom that we think we're looking for. If we can be here right now, it restores us to wholeness and allows us to live our life.

CHAPTER 27

Becoming Unhindered: The Five Difficult Mind States

Sharda Rogell · 57 min

In this talk from the 2007 three-month retreat at IMS, Sharda Rogell provides an in-depth examination of the five hindrances (nīvaraṇa)—desire for sense pleasures, aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt. Rather than viewing these as mere obstacles, she invites practitioners to understand them as natural mind states that, when seen clearly, need not impede our practice.

Using the traditional simile of the clear pond, Rogell illustrates how each hindrance obscures our ability to see deeply: desire is like beautiful dyes distracting the eye, aversion like boiling mud creating turbulence, sloth and torpor like thick algae on the surface, restlessness like wind disturbing the water, and doubt like stirred-up mud making everything murky. She emphasizes that the Pāli term nīvaraṇa means 'covered over'—pointing to how identification with these states obscures our natural mindfulness.

For each hindrance, Rogell offers practical antidotes: reflection on impermanence and wise restraint for desire; mindfulness and compassion for aversion; investigating intention and arousing energy for sloth and torpor; wide awareness and gentle breathing for restlessness; and cultivating faith (saddhā) for doubt. She stresses that as concentration (samādhi) deepens, the mind naturally becomes more content and less susceptible to these difficult states, allowing for greater clarity and insight into the changing nature of experience.

Tonight I'd like to talk about what I call the five difficult mind states. Classically they're called the hindrances, but I like to call them the five difficult mind states because they're mind states that we always have to work with, and they're not necessarily a hindrance to our practice. So I want to talk about these difficult states of mind and also how they're hindrances to a deepening of our clear seeing and our meditation.

Sometimes when we give this talk, it's usually at the beginning of a retreat, and so a number of you are beginning a retreat, so it's appropriate. And a number of you have been sitting for a while, and I still think it's appropriate. When we first come into a retreat, perhaps these states of mind might be a bit more activated, and they may be stronger for you. But people who have been sitting for a while—maybe six weeks, or the yogis who are staying for three months—these difficult mind states may be much less or they may be absent, but they can still arise in more subtle ways. And I wonder,

too, with the transition and the change over the last few days for those who have been here for a while, perhaps there's been some stirrings, and some of these difficult states of mind could get activated again.

So I want to talk about these, and I'll go over them fairly briefly. Each one could be a whole talk in itself. We're talking about five states of mind that the Buddha identified as states of mind that need to be seen, identified, understood, and known how to work with in our practice so that they don't hinder us along the way.

The first one is the wanting mind, or desire for sense pleasures. The second one is aversion, the opposite, or the not-wanting mind. The third one is what we love to say: sloth and torpor—the sleepiness, tiredness, dullness of mind. The fourth one is the opposite energy of that: restlessness, a lot of energy. And the last one is doubt—self-doubt or skeptical doubt.

I want to talk about these and bring some clarity about how we can open to them more fully so we're not hindered along the way. The Pali word for hindrances is *nīvaraṇa*, and it literally translates as "covered over." It really means that when we're identified with our states of mind, our mindfulness gets covered over in a way. We can't see as clearly. We can't see what's happening so well in our experience because we're caught or we're identified. We think that something's wrong, that we need to overcome something in order to continue along our path. So there's a sense of being covered over, and then it's hard to recognize these states of mind just as states of mind without taking them so personally and getting caught up in this whole sense that something's wrong, that we're going the wrong way in our practice.

When we feel hindered—let's tease this word apart—when we feel hindered, we feel like something blocks our way or there's an interference with the flow of movement. That's the sense of being hindered, just as if we were walking down a path and something blocks us or hinders our forward movement. We can't carry on. We can feel like something's in the way: I can't go, I can't go forward. In our meditation, we can feel disconnected from the flow of our experience. We can feel blocked or impeded in some way, like something's not going right. There's almost the sense of hitting a wall or some kind of obstacle. And this is the way we might perceive if we're not seeing clearly what's actually happening.

So to get a sense of this, we can ask: What's our meditation like when we're having a good meditation? What kind of idea do you have about what it means to have a good meditation? When we answer that, we might talk about feeling open, feeling at ease,

things are flowing, there's a sense of the changing, impermanent nature of things, we feel unblocked or a sense that nothing's in the way—some kind of way we feel unhindered.

And when we feel hindered, we might experience more of the sense of being caught, which we call identification—the stickiness of mind. I love this metaphor of the Velcro mind. You know Velcro just sticks together, and when you stick it together and try to peel it apart, it's very hard to get it to come apart. The mind can feel like that when we're identified—sticky in this way. This is a kind of selfing or fixation of self. We have a sense that the flow has stopped because there's clinging in the mind. But nothing's stopped. There's no flow that has been impeded. Nothing can stop the flow of experience. It's just that we experience it this way. We think it's this way. It's a mental thing, a kind of perception or view of what's happening.

We can experience this as a kind of tension in ourselves, a tension between what's actually happening and what we want to have happen, what we would like. And generally, what we like is to feel good, to feel comfortable, to have our expectations of what's happening in our experience match our ideas of what a good meditation is—like I was just saying, that kind of openness, ease, flow. We want to match our standards of what we've set up to be good or right in our meditation.

But all this is just in the way, really. If we can let go of our preferences for what we'd like and allow what's happening to happen, as Sally was speaking about last night, then what's happening in the mind and the body is just the changing landscape of our mind, the changing landscape of our body.

So this is what I want to talk a little bit about with each one of these—how we can actually look at each one of these difficult states of mind and look at it in a way that we don't feel so impeded. We don't feel hindered. We don't have a sense that anything's wrong. This is so important, to overcome this idea.

I can remember so many times in my own practice when my experience started to change and I didn't feel good, or I was having more difficult, unpleasant kinds of experiences, I would think I was doing something wrong. I don't know if you've had this sense. And somehow you have to get over it. I have to get over it. And of course I always wanted to report good experiences to my teachers in the interviews. I didn't want to go in and share my idea of what was difficult. So again, all my expectations about what was good or right, and then wanting to maybe even embellish in some way when I spoke with my teachers about it. All this kind of way that we get caught, get identified with our ideas and our expectations.

I like this simile, this clear pond simile, to point to and get a sense of how each one of these operates. If you imagine the pure mind like a clear pool where you can see down into the depths, then sense desire would be like pouring beautiful dyes into the pool. You would get entranced by the colors and not be able to see down into the depths—distracted, entranced by these beautiful colors.

Aversion would be like if the pond had hot water put into it, or had hot mud on the bottom and it started to boil like a hot spring—mud boiling in hot pools. It would be turbulent and hot and disturbing, and you wouldn't again be able to see down to the bottom. Aversion is like this hot disturbance.

Sloth and torpor would be like thick layers of weeds and algae on the pond's surface, too thick to see to the bottom.

Restlessness is like if there was a strong wind blowing across the top of the pool. Just on the surface, again, you wouldn't be able to see down to the depths.

And doubt, when there's identification with doubt, it's as if somebody took a big stick and stirred up the mud on the bottom of the pond. All the mud came up and the water got murky and cloudy. Again, you can't see clearly. That's what you think the water is—just murky and muddy.

This is the sense of these qualities, the characteristics of the mind states when we get caught up in them.

So the first one, desire—which is really desire for sensual pleasures, the wanting for pleasure, wanting for a pleasurable experience or something that feels good. Do you know this one? This leaning towards, leaning towards.

And you can't really separate desire so much from aversion. These two really work together, because the desire for something is a kind of rejection of what is right now. It's a way that we don't really want to rest into our present experience. So there's a leaning, a kind of toppling forward to something else that we think is going to change our experience enough that we'll feel better than we do now. There's an aversive quality in the desire for that pleasant thing.

And both of them are grasping. Whether it's desire or whether it's aversion, there's a contracted mind state, which then contracts the body. When we're exploring each of these, it's really good to get a sense of the energetic feeling in the body, what it's actually like to feel these, because we have to know them. When they arise, it's like, "Oh yeah, that's desire. That's what this feels like." It's not just a mental contraction of wanting that thing, but we can feel it all through the body when we become sensitive enough.

The energetic feeling is when the body is pulled. You can actually feel it—you can feel like you want to get up and move right towards that object. I've had this so many times in my sitting meditation, where I've had the desire not to be feeling what I'm feeling—which is a kind of aversion—the desire to leave the room. If you're very mindful, you can feel all the muscles just wanting to move the body in that direction of the desire. And you have to contract the body in order to move it. So you can feel this whole energetic movement of desire when you start to get sensitive.

And therefore, in knowing that and being able to observe it, you can interrupt it. You don't have to just follow the desire heedlessly or mindlessly, because there's mindfulness, there's awareness to say, "Oh yeah, I'm being pulled towards something right now and rejecting what's happening in this moment." The mind is not content to be here, and it's seeking its fulfillment outward in something else, some other condition—whether it's the cup of tea, or the soft bed, or fresh air outside. Not that these things are wrong or bad. It's just that we want to know: What's compelling? What's motivating? What's pulling, and what are we being pulled away from? Very important to recognize if there is rejection, if there is grasping happening—which is another way of knowing quite well that desire is happening.

If I believe that my fulfillment is dependent on feeling good, really reflect on this. I'm happy when I feel good.

This way that we're wired up. If I really believe this—that my fulfillment is dependent on feeling good—then I'm going to be manipulating my conditions. Grasping onto the pleasant, pushing away the unpleasant, and probably trying to line up as many pleasant experiences as I can. And this whole kind of manipulation, which comes from the selfing, the sense of me and what I want and what I don't want, is all about me. Rather than this sense of resting back and opening to the flow of conditionality and paying attention to our responses—the aversion and the desire, the aversion and the desire—which we've been talking about and will keep encouraging.

So this pull towards something better than what's happening here, this desire for sensual pleasure. The first thing to do in working with this movement of mind—and the first step always—is the mindfulness of it, the recognition of it, the identification, and becoming familiar with the way this moves in our body, in our mind. Understanding this movement of desire is essential. I'm sure we'll be having many more talks on this, and some of you who have been here already have had many talks, because it's one of the key teachings: the second noble truth of the Buddha, the cause of our dukkha, the

cause of our unsatisfactoriness, is this clinging, this grasping of desire and aversion. So first we want to know it. We really want to know it well. How does it move in our mind and body?

Another useful antidote when you recognize that desire has arisen is to reflect on impermanence. Reflecting on how all conditions arise and pass, come and go. And you can ask yourself the question: How much will fulfilling this desire right now matter tomorrow, or in six months, or at the end of my life? This helps us get some perspective on how big this desire can feel in the moment, but when we look at our life, how important is it really? What if I just sat here right now and didn't act out, or what I call discharge, that energy of the desire? What if I didn't fulfill it but actually sat here and explored, felt, sensed? What if I came into some understanding about the nature of desire itself?

For myself, after years of working with the teachings and the practice, it's so interesting to see that in some ways I can't even reach out anymore. That movement that wants to go out towards what I think is going to bring me my happiness and my fulfillment—I can't even do it anymore. It's like I know so well that my happiness doesn't lie out there, that I need to continually come back here and find the resources and my own capacity for my own aliveness and contentment right here. Anything else is just going to slip right through my fingers, like sand through my fingers. It's so interesting how that wisdom of knowing what's true can just interrupt that flow of conditioned desire.

So the reflection on impermanence. And another antidote that can help us with desire is wise restraint, using moderation. For example, for the people who have been here for a while, for the three-month yogis, it may be a time in your practice where you begin to simplify more if you haven't already. You can eat less or sleep less, put more emphasis on continuity in the practice, really challenge some of the habits to get comfortable. Because it can be interesting how even in this situation you just find your lines of comfort, your places of comfort. And so here's an opportunity to challenge that a little too, start to use a little bit more restraint and see what happens as you begin to look more deeply at this movement of desire for pleasure, for comfort.

The eight precepts are also something that people take on to challenge ourselves in this way. And you'll have an opportunity to take that on for those of you who haven't yet. We don't do this from a place of should, an imposed idea of what we're supposed to do as good practitioners, but more from a place of wisdom that asks the question: If I do this, is it helpful for my awakening, for my liberation? We want to turn the mind, incline the mind towards what's helpful, towards what's supportive for waking up. So we work with things in this way.

And as our concentration starts to deepen and our mind becomes more one-pointed and unified, this begins to counter sense desire, because then even the most alluring distraction cannot move the mind. The mind is just not infatuated with things in the same way. A concentrated mind is happy here, happy at home. So the meditation already supports this interruption and shifting of this condition of mind.

So desire. Now, aversion—the opposite energy. The contracted mind, the not-wanting mind, which is judging, condemning, resistance, anger, fear, hatred. These strong emotions that always have some kind of charge to them. Even when I talk about it, I feel the tightening up of the mind. It's usually a reaction to something unpleasant—through the five senses or something going through the mind. And again, it's the energetic feeling that I've been talking about. We experience the mind and the body in this tightening energy, a resistance to our present reality. We don't want it. We don't like it. We don't want it to be this way. And the mind can get very firm, very strong in its reactivity around this.

There's a belief when aversion is present that something is taking away my happiness, that somehow we're losing our happiness because of this thing that's happening. And only if it didn't happen, if I could change it in some way, if I could do something different—then my happiness will come back. This is conditional happiness, not unconditional happiness, not the happiness of the Buddha. Conditioned happiness, dependent on present conditions.

It's a very complex mind state, aversion is. Because sometimes when we feel aversive, when we feel some of those states that I mentioned, we can notice that in ourselves and then get aversive to ourselves because we're aversive. And then when we see that, we can add another layer of aversion to the aversion to the aversion. It just keeps piling up in all different kinds of fear and resistance and anger and judging. We just can get ourselves in such a tight ball of aversion.

And so what we can do really is work only with the outer layer of aversion. You can't really get down into what the aversion is really about. You almost have to just notice the most outer reaction to the aversion. Say, "Oh yeah, I'm reacting to my aversive mind," and bring some softness, some kindness to that. And then as you begin to soften that, you can start moving more in towards what's in the center there. It's very complex.

So again, for the three-month yogis, the transition here may have stirred some things up for you. Many more people came in. You have a much bigger group of people here than you had for the six weeks. People aren't as quiet generally, moving around maybe a little faster or maybe not as mindful, closing the doors yet, that sort of thing. And

there can be that reaction. What can happen is the blame and the judgment come up so quickly that we're missing feeling the unpleasant quality of the experience that we're actually reacting to. It's not about what's happening out there. It's not about what anybody's doing here. It's about how we are with it, how we're responding to it, how we're reacting towards it. And when you look closely, you see it's just something so unpleasant that it's hard to stay with it. It's hard to be mindful.

I can remember during one of my early three-month retreats, sitting and just feeling all this aversion in my mind contract, and I didn't even know why. Finally, I just asked myself, "What's going on? What's going on here?" And I came down into my body, and I noticed that I had this really bad ache, a little pain in my kidney—just a teeny little really sharp pain—and I didn't want to feel it. Feeling that, just the subtlety of that unpleasantness, was too much to feel. And as I recognized that, I brought my attention down and felt it, and that was it. My experience started to open. My mind started to open. And I could breathe again. It's like, "Oh, just that. I didn't want that there. It was very uncomfortable."

Sometimes we don't even know. We don't even know what we're reacting to. We don't know what's going on. So we want to ask, perhaps, what is so painful about this situation that I'll do anything not to feel it, not to be present with my experience? Because sometimes it's really hard just to be that simple with ourselves when we're feeling unpleasantness.

So the antidotes, working with aversion, really are mindfulness and compassion. Recognizing, acknowledging, in some sense, "This is aversion in the mind. The mind is filled with aversion right now." And then to see if we can turn towards it and feel it. Feel the contraction. Actually start to bring the awareness closer to the unpleasantness, as Guy was speaking about this morning. Begin to soften around the contraction and see what happens as we breathe and soften, breathe and soften.

But you really need curiosity. You need a certain willingness and curiosity to do this, or we'll just stay in the separation and the resistance. Because it's hard. It's hard to do this practice that we're being asked to do here, especially when we're talking about painful aspects. And the aversion doesn't need to go away. We just want to invite some understanding. What is it? Why? What happens if the mind gets involved in these difficult states? Aversion is an energy that wants to, again, discharge.

It wants to act out so we can discharge and get rid of that difficult state. By being mindful of the energy and containing it—this energy that wants to act out in some way—we can begin to neutralize the reaction. Just the holding of the energy, without discharging, can begin to neutralize it. As concentration develops and we have more con-

tact with the present moment, we begin to feel delight and joy in the contact itself with the present. This joy then shuts out the aversion and ill will. It actually keeps the aversion at bay because we start to feel satisfied with the sense of presence—the recognition that we actually can be here for ourselves no matter what's happening.

So those are desire and aversion. The third hindrance is sloth and torpor. All you have to do is say it and you know what it is. You can identify it right away because your whole body just starts to go to sleep. The loss of energy, the lack of energy, the sleepiness, dullness, laziness, boredom—when there's just not much energy to even pay attention or to lift the mind to our experience. We feel heavy, we feel pulled down, we feel like we're sinking.

And yet we're asked to stay present even with this. This can be hard because how are we going to be present when it takes energy to be present and there isn't any? It can be easy to feel aversive towards this state because we think we're not doing good meditation. If we can't lift the mind, if we can't be more mindful, if we're just dull or tired, we can easily judge and condemn ourselves. But if we are able to stay present with this too, it can help to deepen our concentration.

It's really important to investigate this mind state because we human beings have a general habit of cutting off from our experience, of going to sleep, of not really wanting to be here so much. Becoming a bit dull or sleepy or not really paying attention is sometimes a little more comfortable. It's a little easier than actually knowing what's going on. Again, it's a challenge to be here.

There are three possibilities when we're feeling sleepy or dull. One is that it may be a genuine physical need. It's interesting how many people forget this on meditation retreats—that the body needs rest. Perhaps we're not feeling well, or we're a little bit off, or we've just arrived and are making the adjustment. A number of you have just come in. You may have had stressful conditions before you came, and it takes some time to bring clarity or sharpness. All this is natural and not unusual at all, particularly at the beginning of a retreat. For me, on a ten-day retreat, it would often take four days before I started to get over my sleepiness or dullness. I remember thinking that was really a problem given that it was only ten days, and I would sometimes give myself a hard time. But for some reason, this body and mind goes through that, and all I could do was bring mindful attention to it without judging myself.

The second possibility is that it may be a strong habit or tendency of mind to shut down—a way we actually get defensive in relationship to our experience when it's too hard to feel, too hard to allow in what's happening. We have a habit of keeping things away. This is something we want to know and understand if it's occurring for us. When

we do this kind of cutting off over a long period of time, over years, we can actually feel a numbness in our nervous system, like a dull coating over our experience. It's as if we can't even make contact because of this numbing or freezing habit in our system. We experience it as dullness or lethargy.

But when we start to wake up from this, as we do on longer retreats, what can happen is that we're actually bringing unconscious material up into consciousness. That can be hard, so we might want to retreat to our old strategies. It's important to know that as we wake up, we're uncovering—allowing certain issues to surface that we may not have looked at before. This is good. We want this so we can have more understanding, more self-understanding of who I am, what this is about.

So we have the physical need and the habit of mind. Another way we might cut off from our experience is resisting something that's happening in the present.

There's some intuition, some kind of sense that something's occurring, and I don't want to feel it. I don't want to know about it. It's like, "Not this. I'm not ready for this." And there can be a way of just habitually cutting off, pushing it out—something we might want to know about if we're doing that. It might be a way that our consciousness hasn't yet caught up with this particular pattern, and we're still not aware. It hasn't come into our consciousness, and we're still resisting it. Yet often these are emotional issues that do need some attention, whether they're some kind of fear, or loneliness, or some kind of anger, or a memory that might be surfacing. Can we work with the resistance—at first the sleepiness—and then, as we start to open, find ways to hold what's arising? We'll be talking more about the skill in doing this.

So this is what we want to examine around sleepiness: What's actually occurring? What's going on? We bring our attention to it. The antidote for working with it is to bring energy, to arouse some energy, because we need energy to explore, to investigate.

The first step in working with sleepiness is to really look at our relationship to it. Is there aversion to it? Is there resistance to the fact that I'm sleepy? Because if there is, then we can't really examine the sleepiness. First we have to work with the resistance—take off that layer—and then we can start to work with the sleepiness. If there is aversion, we want to include that in our awareness: "Oh yes, aversion is here." We bring our mindful attention to the aversion. That's also present. We don't have to somehow override it or push it away. "Okay, now it's aversion. That hindrance is present."

Otherwise, what can happen is that if we don't notice the resistance, it feeds the tiredness. If we're in a mode of resistance, we can just get more tired and not really know that we're feeding the tiredness in that way. It takes a lot of energy to be aversive. Have you noticed? It's really tiring to stay in an aversive mode.

So one aspect is looking at our relationship to the sleepiness. And then the second antidote is to really look at our intention to stay present. Are you actually interested in being present? Because in working with sleepiness, it takes a strong intention to arouse the energy when there isn't much there. You really need the intention to stay present with the sleepiness. There needs to be a certain determination, a certain sincere interest in that. And the intention actually brings energy. Anytime we have the intention to make something happen in a wholesome way, that already brings energy to the mindfulness.

So this returning back again—breathing, keeping our back straight, opening our eyes, putting your arms up on top of your head, standing up, doing faster walking—all of this helps to bring more energy when we're feeling a bit dull. But again, it takes a certain intention, a sincere interest to want to work with your energy in this way, to balance your energy when it gets too low, when it gets too dull.

Sometimes when you're sitting for longer periods and the concentration is strong, the tranquility and calm can get very deep, and this can create a kind of sinking mind. You can become so calm that you just sink away into the tranquility. So it can be a way that dullness or tiredness comes about through strong concentration, actually. This is just another way we want to balance the energy, using the same kind of antidotes to bring a bit more energy back. This intention to aim our attention at our experience—either the breath or the body—actually lifts the mind up and can counter this dullness of mind. This is how we can work with sleepiness in our practice.

Now, restlessness and worry. This is an agitated mind and body—the opposite energy. Agitation, anxiety, worry, frustration, edginess, irritability: another very complex mind state. Thoughts, feelings, sensations all happening together, very difficult to be with, and there's often aversion compounded with it.

Because the restlessness can be so unpleasant, we are often in resistance to it. The mind can be very scattered, unfocused, unable to rest. It moves in the past and the future, going into all kinds of memories and plannings and fantasy—this restless mind. You can spend hours going over the same thing again and again. It can be a sense of unfinished business, things you have to take care of, or conflicts you've had, and your mind just goes over and over and over again, trying to figure out a solution. "If I could

just figure it out," you think, just going over and over. But it's just restless mind, really. And it goes into the body—agitated, nervous, and unsteady. The ground can feel very unsteady.

As I've explored restlessness in my own experience, I've really come to appreciate how deeply conditioned it is. I think I always kind of just thought of it as a hindrance I could overcome in my practice, but I now see this is really one of the more deeply conditioned, difficult mind states. One of my teachers, Hamid Ali, who started the Diamond Heart School, the Ridwan School in California, describes restlessness like this. He says that restlessness is a contraction in the nervous system. It is the specific feeling of suffering. It's not just pain or anger or fear. It is emotional suffering in its purest form. It is the suffering at the core of all human pains.

Very deep. It's just this uneasiness of being in a human body and a human mind. And when I really appreciate this in this way, I see how easy it is to judge ourselves. When there's the fear or the worry or the restlessness, it's so easy to judge ourselves and make ourselves wrong for it. But it's very, very deep. And it takes so much compassion, so much kindness towards ourselves when we're feeling this.

So the antidote really is to bring a certain calm and steadiness of mind, as much as we can, without adding more pressure from the judgment, the aversion, the resistance. We really have to work with that outer layer—the relationship to the restlessness—so that we can begin to let the body and mind find its own balance, its own homeostasis. We're not adding more pressure. It's like being in a pressure cooker. We want to take the lid off as much as we can so that energy can start to release.

So we watch the judgment, the aversion, the resistance, but we also want to have a wide awareness, an open awareness, to hold the whole body. You can do gentle breathing, but not a very focused, very specific attention on the breath—more a gentle breathing with a wide awareness, to allow the energy to move in a wide field. It's sort of like the metaphor of cows being happier when they're in a wide field than in a small, closed pasture. Open it up so that energy can just move. It takes a lot of kind attention to ourselves when we're in this state.

And as the concentration deepens, we experience a kind of happiness of mind that is born from the concentration. The mind starts to be happier at home, and there's no need to go anywhere else. There's no need to find other conditions to overcome this restlessness. We start to experience more ease and comfort within ourselves. It's this happiness, this sukha, that actually starts to exclude the restlessness and the worry. We start to feel more present here, more comfortable here. This is the contentment that arises in us as we go deeper into understanding the conditions of this mind and body.

So we have desire, aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness—and the last one is doubt. Skeptical doubt or self-doubt. And as you may have heard, this is the most powerful one of all. I remember when I first heard that, I thought, "What? It doesn't seem like it would be more powerful than desire or aversion." But it's the most powerful one because if it's not seen, if we identify with it, if we believe the doubt—the self-doubt about ourselves, about our practice, about the teachings, about the teachers—we'll stop our practice. We'll stop meditation. We'll leave. "I won't even do it. I'm out of here. I don't have the capacity to do this. I don't like these teachers anyhow. Was the Buddha even enlightened? Who knows if the Buddha was ever enlightened? It's all mythology. What are we doing here anyhow?"

"I'm not a good meditator. I never could meditate. I can't keep my attention here. I'm fed up. I don't have any capacity to do this practice." And we just leave. We stop.

It's a very complex mind state because it's a confused mind state, an indecisive mind state. "Well, should I stay? Shouldn't I stay? Can I do it? Can't I do it? Maybe I can, but oh, it doesn't seem like I can." There's no real ground of our being. We feel very unsteady. We feel a bit lost, groundless in this mind state. There's no trust. There's no faith when this mind state is present—no faith in our own capacity to wake up, no faith even in the truth of liberation. Doubt is the opposite of faith. Faith in our capacities, in the teachings, in the teachers.

This is from Sharon Salzberg's book called *Faith*: "When we believe that our circumstances, inner and outer, will never change, and that there is nothing we can ever do to find love or peace again, our faith is consumed by hopelessness and doubt." When we really believe this, it can be so debilitating, really so painful—when we start to believe ourselves as so small and limited, really viewing and perceiving reality from this place of ego, this very small, narrow mind. From this location, we just don't see clearly. It's that muddy water.

And so it's so important to actually see doubt as doubt, to recognize it for what it is—which can be so slippery because when you're in doubt, again, it's hard to find that place where you're going to be mindful and attentive in a clear way. But if you can see it, then you can see that doubts are just thoughts, again, rising and passing. They have no real reality to them. They're just blips in the mind that we give so much power to. We make up a whole story about who I am and who I am in this world and my place in this world. And then we start to live our life from that story as if it's true.

We often don't actually doubt our doubt. This is the great doubt, the wholesome doubt that can doubt the unwholesome doubt. Bring in this skepticism that says, "Wait a minute, maybe that's not true. Maybe the way that I've been thinking about myself and my life and who I am in this world has just been a limited view"—like Sally was talking about, this cup that's half empty or half full. Which way are we looking at it?

Faith is what can dispel doubt. When we trust in our capacity, we trust in our goodness. We trust in the goodness of human beings. We trust in the wisdom of these teachings. We trust in others who have walked this path. This faith in what has gone before somehow cultivates a sense of faith in ourselves and what's possible. Which is partly our job too—we want to inspire faith in you so that you can have a ground to stand on and to wake up into the fullness of your own potential and your own capacity.

And practice itself is an antidote to doubt because it helps us see through the mind, the patterns of the mind. It gives us tools and a way to begin to examine what we've taken to be so true that actually may not be so true. So even being here, the practice and your dedication and willingness to look deeply into what's true is an antidote to the doubt. And the practice also invites a kind of surrender and letting go to what truly is, so that we're not as caught up in the figments of our imagination—piercing through our perception so that our perception is more accurate, as accurate as we may be able to get it through this practice of bare attention.

And as our concentration deepens and we're more immersed in our present experience as it is, there's really no space for doubt to arise. We are present and connected with reality as it is. We see. This is how it is. "I'm feeling tired. I'm feeling agitated." Or "I'm feeling doubtful, but I see it." We're immersed in our experience, so there's no room for doubt to expand, for it to grow, because we see clearly as the concentration deepens. So these five difficult mind states—

I think that much of what we develop in our practice on a retreat is really how to work with these mind states. This is what we're working with—desire and aversion. We talk about paying attention to the attitudes of mind, how the mind moves in grasping towards the pleasant, pushing away the unpleasant. And then our ways of getting sleepy or dull or doubtful about our experience, and then the imbalances in our energy. We learn how to balance in skillful ways so that our energy doesn't get too strongly agitated or excited, but we're also not getting too passive or dull. All these ways that we begin to learn and work with in our practice—this is what we're learning and practicing here.

And probably you've heard through what I've been saying that as our meditation develops, the hindrances, or the way that they become obstacles in our practice, start to open up. Our concentration can deepen, and then these states of mind don't arise in the same way—maybe more subtly, or they disappear for some time. This allows our consciousness to be more refined, which brings forth more power and clarity and strength and brightness of mind, which then supports the deepening of insight so that we see things more clearly the way they are.

So these hindrances don't need to hinder our clear seeing. Really, we just want to see them for what they are. That's the first step—just see them for what they are. Just desire arising, aversion arising, sleepiness, restlessness, doubt. Or as our dear teacher Joseph would say, "Empty phenomena rolling on." Just the landscape of our mind.

May our wisdom and our compassion awaken.

CHAPTER 28

First Noble Truth: Suffering (Dukkha)

Guy Armstrong · 56 min

> *In this dharma talk from the 2007 Three-Month Retreat at IMS, Guy Armstrong offers a profound exploration of the First Noble Truth as presented in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11), the Buddha's first discourse. Rather than presenting Buddhism's teaching on suffering as pessimistic, Armstrong reveals how understanding dukkha becomes genuinely ennobling when we recognize its universal nature rather than taking it personally.*
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> *Armstrong illuminates the three types of dukkha: dukkha-dukkha (direct pain), viparināma dukkha (the suffering of change), and saṅkhāra dukkha (the unsatisfactoriness of all conditioned phenomena). He explains how each requires increasingly subtle attention to perceive, with saṅkhāra dukkha only visible through concentrated meditative insight that reveals the moment-to-moment arising and passing of all experience. Drawing on teachings from Ajahn Chah and the Dalai Lama, he emphasizes that truly helping others requires complete understanding of all three levels.*
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> *The talk addresses common misunderstandings about the First Noble Truth, including the tendency to blame ourselves or others when suffering arises. Armstrong offers the liberating insight that since ignorance—the root cause of suffering—has no discernible beginning, we cannot ultimately be at fault for our suffering. He explores how the injunction to 'fully understand' dukkha becomes a lifetime's practice, transforming suffering into a training ground for the pāramīs including compassion, patience, and equanimity. The teaching concludes with Ajahn Chah's reflection that there is suffering leading to more suffering and suffering leading to the end of suffering—and wisdom alone reveals the difference.*

The talk tonight is on suffering and the cause of suffering. You may recognize this is an abridgment of the Four Noble Truths, focusing only on the unhappy parts, so prepare yourselves.

I was once about to give the Four Noble Truths talk here and someone in the staff room said to me, "Do you really want to talk about that? We've really heard quite a lot about dukkha already in this retreat." But hey, that's what being in a Theravadan center is all about, so I hope you'll feel right at home. The Buddha said at one point that the realization of the Four Noble Truths is accompanied only by happiness and joy, so I hope that will be your experience tonight.

I'm sure you all have heard the story of the Buddha's awakening under the Bodhi tree near the town of Gaya—how he thought of not teaching but was urged to do so by a Brahma who descended and said there are beings who will understand. He then traveled across a couple of hundred miles of northern India to find five friends he had practiced with before in his ascetic period, called the group of five bhikkhus in the discourses. He located them in the deer park in Sarnath near Benares, approached them, and delivered his first Dharma discourse. In that discourse he laid out the basic teaching on the Four Noble Truths.

The talk tonight is primarily based on his first discourse called the Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta, which translates as "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma"—this wheel that he established almost 2,600 years ago and which is still transforming beings' lives even today. The rest of his forty-five years of teachings until he was eighty were really just an amplification of this first talk, sort of like footnotes to it.

You may also remember that famous sutta of the handful of leaves, where the Buddha said, "Which is greater, O monks, the handful of leaves that I've collected in my hand or the leaves in the trees in the forest around us?" The monks, being no simpletons, said, "Well, of course, the handful of leaves is not nearly as great as the leaves in all the forest." But what you may not know is that he went on to say in that discourse: "Just so is what I have shared with you—very small compared to all the things I know by direct knowledge. But what I have shared with you is enough for you to gain complete liberation, and what I have shared with you, what you are to understand, are the Four Noble Truths." So he again reiterated that as the essence of the handful of leaves that his teaching had disclosed.

I'll mention the Four Noble Truths briefly as a way of review. The first is the truth of suffering. The second is the truth that the origin of suffering is craving. The third is the truth that the end of suffering lies in the end of craving. And the fourth is that the way to the end of suffering is through the Noble Eightfold Path.

Tonight I want to talk about these first two noble truths. What distinguishes the Buddha from simply a philosopher is that in addition to the insights of the Four Noble Truths as just outlined, he added to each one an injunction, a direction, a command. It was not sufficient just to hear the teachings; with each of the Four Noble Truths there was a suggestion or prescription that those listening needed to carry out. From the very first days of his sasana, of his teaching, the Buddha was not simply philosophizing—he was directing people how to walk the path to liberation. I'll talk about the injunctions or prescriptions as well as we go through these Four Noble Truths.

The way he expressed the first truth is like this: "This is the noble truth of suffering. Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering. Sorrow, lamenting, pain, grief, and despair are suffering. Association with what is displeasing is suffering. Separation from what is pleasing is suffering. Not getting what one wants is suffering. In brief, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering."

This truth is sometimes represented, especially in the non-Buddhist world, as "Oh, the Buddha taught that life is suffering" or "everything is suffering," which casts a kind of gloomy pall around the notion of Buddhism. But this is not what the Buddha is saying, and it's not implicit in this statement. It's not what he meant either, I don't believe.

The word he was using throughout the Four Noble Truths, which we usually translate as suffering, is the Pali word dukkha. No English word is adequate to translate the range of meanings implicit within this Pali term. I'm going to use suffering as the primary translation as we go through the talk, but please be aware that it's not a very good translation—it's simply such a common one that I'll use it.

Dukkha has a whole range of meanings, from the most intense kind of pain imaginable, which usually carries a strong experience of suffering, down to very subtle levels of unsatisfactoriness or unreliability. The basic sense is that this world, as available through our six senses, is not capable of providing lasting satisfaction. You could say that perhaps the best general translation for dukkha is "incapable of satisfying," but that's cumbersome, so we shorten it to suffering. The range extends from intense experiences of unhappiness to very subtle experiences of lack of fulfillment.

Some other translations you'll read in different texts include unsatisfactoriness, unhappiness, unreliability, stress, and anguish. All of these convey facets of the meaning of dukkha. When you come to any specific passage, it's helpful to understand which aspect or nuance of meaning the passage is particularly pointing to, because some passages point to direct experiences of pain while others point to the more subtle manifestations of unreliability.

as pointing to a kind of lack, or you could say a lack of fulfillment, that is universal in the way that as humans we live our lives until we undergo the training that leads to freedom. There is a universal sense of insufficiency, of feeling that something is missing. There is not a general and constant pervasive sense of contentment throughout the human world, as you may have noticed.

Even if we have everything externally—which so often these days we have in this Western paradise that technology has helped to give us—it seems that the basic level of unhappiness is perhaps even increasing in our world.

But this also doesn't mean that everything is miserable. There are people whose lives are basically happy, who have a great deal of happiness and even contentment in their lives—ordinary people, untrained. Yet even for such people, where there's a baseline of happiness and contentment, there are good days and bad days. There are pleasurable experiences and unpleasurable experiences. There are times of frustration as well as times of contentment. But this pointing to an essential lack of fulfillment is, I think, a good way to remember the essence of this truth.

One of the things I appreciate a lot in the way the Buddha phrased his teaching on the First Noble Truth is how universal it is. If he had come along and said, "Basically, life really sucks," a lot of people would have just turned off and gone to hear somebody else—probably in California—who was painting a much rosier view of the human condition. But everything that he says is hard to disagree with. Birth, aging, illness, death, sorrow, and pain are all suffering. We can all relate to that. The association with what we don't like and the separation from what we like and not getting what we want—these are things that everyone can relate to as happening regularly in our lives.

The other thing I appreciate is that in its universality, it's also very impersonal. It doesn't say, "I am suffering," or "You are suffering," or "You should realize how much you're suffering, guys." It doesn't say it that way. And when you think about it, if we take it that way, that has a really different feeling.

How often in our minds do we kind of take it that way? "Oh, I really have a lot of suffering in my life. I have a problem in this part of my life. I've had this very painful pattern of emotion in my psychology for years and years. I don't know what I'm going to do about it. I don't know when I will get rid of it." These are the kinds of thoughts that tend to spin out when we phrase this as "I am suffering."

It's a very different feeling when we step back and take a look at the universality of suffering as a noble truth. When we go on in the vein of "I am suffering," does it feel very noble to you? It generally doesn't to me. When my mind runs in those directions, it feels lowering. I feel weighted down by the burden of those kinds of thoughts. It's not uplifting. It doesn't elevate me, and it doesn't give me dignity.

But when we see it as this universal psychological condition that all human beings are subject to, that to me is more what our friend Stephen Batchelor calls "ennobling." That becomes an ennobling truth.

Why? For a few reasons. Number one, if we don't take our own difficulties so personally, then we might be able to accept them more easily. When we realize that what we're struggling with is part of the universal human condition, well, maybe it's not so much our fault. Maybe it doesn't invalidate us as a person.

Secondly, it can help connect us to everyone else that we meet. In this culture, we tend to put a premium on being upbeat and happy and putting on a smiling face in public. And sometimes we are, let's say, taken in or forget to look under the surface of the cultural appearance to recognize that everybody is dealing with these same issues of birth and aging and illness and death and being separated from what is pleasing. When we start to go a little deeper into this universal human condition of unsatisfactoriness, then we can start to connect also with everyone we meet, knowing that somehow we're in the same boat with them. And this kind of connectedness is the doorway to awakening compassion.

I think this is one of the great benefits of the Brahmavihara practices. As we go through the phrases in either metta or compassion, we realize we all share the same deep wishes, and we all have the same deep struggles in achieving them. The Brahmaviharas serve then as a way of uniting us in the human family, of allowing our compassion and goodwill to flow out.

Sometimes the sense that "I am suffering" and the claiming it as ours has just the opposite effect. It can feel quite isolating, as though we have to be ashamed of the pain that we feel—that we can't expose it, that we can't share it with anyone else.

There's a lovely poem by Naomi Shihab Nye that expresses this connection. It's called "Kindness."

Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things.

Feel the future dissolve in a moment like salt in a weakened broth. What you held in your hand, what you counted and carefully saved, all this must go, so you know how desolate the landscape can be between the regions of kindness.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road. You must see how this could be you. How he too was someone who journeyed through the night with plans, and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing. You must wake up with sorrow. You must speak to it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows, and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore. Only kindness that ties your shoes and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread. Only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say, it is I you have been looking for, and then goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend.

The line I most appreciate in this poem is where she says, "you must speak to sorrow till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth." The size of the cloth is vast. It's universal. It includes all sentient beings, all subject to the first noble truth of unsatisfactoriness.

As we start to explore the kinds of unsatisfactoriness that we encounter—and meditation practice is the only way I know of to plumb the depths of this kind of seeing—we come upon three kinds that the Buddha talked about. He said the three kinds are dukkha-dukkha. Can you guess what that is? That's like a double hit—the immediate pain of existence. Then there is viparinama dukkha, which is the pain of alternation: we may have pleasurable circumstances for a while, but when they change, we feel the loss and separation, the pain of change. And the third is called sankhara dukkha. You could translate this as the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena.

Looking briefly at the level of dukkha-dukkha, it's helpful from time to time to reflect that this is an integral part of our world. The experiences of illness and death are clearly, for most of us, going to feel like dukkha-dukkha. When we look around the world and think of the wars and conflicts going on—the genocide and the torture, places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Darfur, Tibet—we see big eruptions of this kind of intense suffering. Even in our own society, where there is not a time of war, if you really start to listen to the stories of the people that you meet, you'll find instances not so far from our own lives, in our own home, of murder, of rape, of racism, and abuse of children. All of this is going on in our own communities, all around us.

Living in the fairly privileged lives that I think most of us live, we are still subject to various kinds of dukkha-dukkha. Sally and I were leading a class a few years ago of senior students who had all been practicing for a while and were materially reasonably comfortable. We had been working together for some months, if not years at that point. And one evening I asked the group to talk about the pain that was in their own individual lives.

I'll mention just a few of the things that people shared that evening. They talked about a sense of isolation and a lack of connection with others. They talked about still dealing with their afflictive emotions—depression or sadness or anger or anxiety. They talked about feeling the pressures in their work life and the struggle to make ends meet and a fear of inadequacy, of not performing well enough in their work. Because this

was a group partly of roughly our generation, they were already feeling the effects of aging and talked about the difficulty of that. And everyone knew the impact of illness. Again, probably because of the age of our group, there was a lot of discussion of aging parents who are losing their capacities and declining physically and mentally, which, as you know, is a very sad thing to see in people that you're close to. These were just some of the common experiences for people even in the fairly select circle of practitioners.

Viparinama dukkha, the pain of alternation or change, is something we're all subject to. We enjoy pleasurable conditions or experiences, and when they change, we tend to feel the loss of them. If there's been even the slightest inclination of grasping—even the slightest—then there will be at least some pain or friction when the change happens.

Ajahn Chah said this alternation of pain and pleasure is like a poisonous snake. He said if you grab the head of a poisonous snake, it will bite you right away, and that's dukkha-dukkha. But if you grab hold of the tail, which is the non-painful end, and you hold on, eventually the head will swing around and bite you too, and that's viparinama dukkha. So the lesson is: don't grab. It's not easy to do.

The third type of dukkha the Buddha talked about is called sankhara dukkha, the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena. Conditioned phenomena are unsatisfactory because they are unstable. They are all unstable. Every state that is put together from prior causes and conditions is already falling apart.

It's not like viparinama dukkha, where we see that something is going to fall apart at some time in the future. With the insight of sankara dukkha, we bring concentrated attention to our moment-to-moment experience and we see that every mind state, every physical sensation, and every external sense impression is arising and passing over and over again, moment after moment after moment. When we come into that level of seeing, we truly see the unreliability of conditioned phenomena.

We had the opportunity a few years ago in California to hear the Dalai Lama. Sally and I were there; I think Sharda was there too. He was outdoors in the Shoreline Amphitheater in Mountain View—it's a place that Led Zeppelin might have played twenty years ago. It's a huge stage, and if Led Zeppelin had been there, it would have been full of their speakers. But on this day, the backdrop to the stage was a huge painting. The whole stage was a painting of the Potala Palace, where the Dalai Lama used to live in Lhasa, painted in the colors of sunset. There were these purple and orange colors streaking the sky and reflecting off the windows of the painted Potala Palace. The Dalai Lama was on a big throne, projected over big screen televisions so that everyone—there were several thousand people in the seats and on the grass amphitheater—could

see him. It was a very wonderful feeling. It was kind of like being at a Dharma Woodstock. It had that festival atmosphere. Being with the Dalai Lama for three days as he taught on the subject of emptiness from the Heart Sutra was wonderful to listen to.

What he said about these three kinds of dukkha is that each takes an increasing subtlety of attention to see and understand. Everyone can be aware of dukkha dukkha, the suffering of pain. With a little bit of thought and reflection and examination of experience, one comes to understand that even pleasurable experiences come to an end—but that takes some investigation and reflection. And then it's only with the very subtle attention of a concentrated mind that can see the moment-to-moment arising and passing that we really deeply understand the unreliability of all conditioned things. This is the way the Dalai Lama explained it also. And he said that if you really want to help people in this world completely become free of their suffering, you need to understand these three levels completely yourself. Only then will you be able to help others release their bondage in these forms of dukkha.

There is a quote from the Pali Canon, put in the mouth of a Brahma, one of the higher gods, but it expresses a dharmic teaching: "Having seen form's flaw, its chronic trembling, the wise do not cling to form." Sankara dukkha is a pointer to this trembling within form—that moment by moment things are not stable, not even for one moment, but they're constantly being created and dissolving, created and dissolving. Thus the wise do not cling to form.

Our problem, of course, is that we don't really see dukkha in this way. We're blinded by very deep conditioned tendencies. We have very strongly built-in biases to see the possibility of happiness in the world, to see the possibility of permanence, and to see a self—when in fact, as you all know, the things of the world aren't capable of satisfying, they are impermanent, and they do not constitute a self. But our conditioned nature is such that we keep looking for lasting happiness, permanence, and self. It's a form of ignorance that is clouding our understanding.

So we approach spiritual practice with the same attitude that we've approached our worldly life. By and large, we are all intelligent enough to have understood that lasting happiness doesn't come from external things. But when we come into the spiritual world, we tend to think that true happiness may be found in lasting spiritual things. This is certainly true for me, and I see it still in my tendency when I'm not looking closely.

I keep thinking that if I just get my attention right and my posture right and my concentration right and my intention right, I'm going to be able to sort everything out. I'm going to find this nice plateau of peace and concentration and openness and metta, and

then I'm just going to be able to hang there—for six weeks at least, hopefully the rest of my life, but six weeks would be a good start. And then every time it doesn't happen that way, I feel like I've blown it. I've got to go back and set those conditions better. I find in myself this tendency to look to land somewhere in some meditative state that's going to be ongoing.

Meditative states are also part of compounded phenomena. Until you realize the unconditioned, meditative states are all put together by prior conditions. So just as they were put together, they will also fall apart.

So we not only keep wanting things out in the world, but we bring the same attitude here and we keep wanting things to be a certain way in meditation.

Now, it is definitely true that there are skillful attitudes to cultivate, skillful states of mind to cultivate in Dharma practice. And it does so happen that those skillful attitudes and skillful states of mind tend to feel better than the unskillful ones. So do you see the dilemma here? We do want to cultivate the factors of the Eightfold Path, the seven factors of enlightenment. And the factors of the Eightfold Path and the seven factors of enlightenment do feel better than their opposites.

So the question is, are you cultivating them out of a desire for pleasant experience, or are you cultivating them out of wisdom, knowing that they are onward leading? This is an interesting one to explore. I'm going to come back and touch on it again a little later, but it's an interesting one to keep an eye on.

Life throughout—worldly life, spiritual life—doesn't have cozy plateaus. It is changeable. It is raw. It's very vivid. And it's often intense. That tends to be our experience here as well as outside. But this changeable quality, while it's initially disappointing, works to our benefit in the long run.

I came upon this quotation in the Samyutta, and it caused me to ponder for a few moments, but I love the way the Buddha says this. He says, basically—I'm paraphrasing—if there was one speck of permanent form as big as my fingernail, then the holy life lived for the purpose of liberation would not be possible. In other words, if there was this amount of permanence in the universe, it would gum up the works, and we would not be able to transform our mind from its current state, clouded by ignorance, into a state of full enlightenment. So it is only due to the impermanent and essentially empty nature of our own being that we are able to make that transformation. Suffering is not stuck either.

So what was the injunction? What's the prescription that goes with the First Noble Truth? The Buddha said, "This noble truth of suffering is to be fully understood." This is the injunction with the First Noble Truth: it is to be fully understood. Part of the implication of that is we don't understand it now. Even after listening to this very eloquent discourse, you probably do not fully understand the First Noble Truth. And I have to admit, I don't either.

What does that mean, that we don't fully understand it now? Well, I think as a practice direction, this is a wonderful instruction. In order to fully understand this truth, we need to keep applying it over and over in our experience until we understand its depth. That means we can use it as a frame to bring in again and again and again to look at the way our experience is unfolding.

Ajahn Sumedho said that of his own practice—he used the Four Noble Truths as his primary practice orientation for all the years of his unfolding. That meant he would bring them in and apply them, check them out in each situation that he found himself in. He calls this a lifetime's practice: the understanding and the application of the First Noble Truth.

So let's talk about some of the ways that we don't see it. When we are experiencing some difficulty, how often do we see it as, "Oh, this is the First Noble Truth revealing itself"? Is it the first thought that comes to mind? How often do we think, "Oh, I've screwed up again. It's my suffering that's coming to the fore." So often we see it as there's something wrong with me, there's something wrong with somebody else, or there's something wrong with the world—and the world includes this center, the facility, the food, the weather.

Notice that because we don't like to see the truth of dukkha, we have a lot of ways of missing the point. We might deny to ourselves that it's happening: "Oh no, this isn't pain. This isn't as bad as it was yesterday anyway." Or we could judge ourselves: "You just did something wrong. It's your fault that there's pain now." Because the Noble Truth encourages us to take responsibility for suffering and the end of suffering, one can get this impression from the Buddha's teachings that we are at fault if we're suffering.

There's a sutta reference where a questioner comes and asks the Buddha, "Am I the cause of my own suffering?" I was very surprised to read that the Buddha said no. I found this very liberating. And then the questioner went on, "Was another the cause of my suffering?"

Think about mom and dad, if nothing else. And the Buddha said no. And the questioner said, well, how is it then? And the Buddha went through the chain of dependent origination. When ignorance is present as a condition, karmic formations arise. With karmic formations as a condition, consciousness arises, and so on—a sequence of twelve steps that ends in suffering. We'll probably talk about it more later.

The interesting thing to me, something that has made me reflect a lot, is that the first step in that chain which leads to suffering is ignorance. So I want to ask each of you: did you put your ignorance there? Do you remember ever kind of knowingly creating it? There's an enlightened mind to start with, but you slid ignorance into the picture to cover it? No. In fact, the Buddha said that a beginning for ignorance cannot be discerned—that we have been traveling this round really since beginningless time.

So if we're not responsible for ignorance, and ignorance is the primary source of our suffering, how can we ultimately say it's our fault? This may sound abstract to you, but the more I came to see ignorance as the fundamental problem in my relationship to life, the less I had to say, "Oh, I made that happen." And I saw that all the mistakes and all the blunders I'd taken in life, all the suffering I'd caused, stemmed from that ignorance. So the judgment of ourselves is off the mark of the noble truths. There are many, many causes and conditions that have led to the situation we find ourselves in.

Similarly, if we try to escape from the experience of pain by blaming others, we're also missing the point of the first noble truth. You can blame other people all day long for your suffering. Does it ever alleviate it? It hasn't for me. It can keep us stuck in a resentful or blaming attitude, but it doesn't seem to lift it.

So can we, when we're in difficulty, if we see a tendency to blame ourselves or to blame others or to blame the world, just stop for a moment and say, "Oh, this is a form of dukkha. This is the first noble truth." And then we might inquire a little more into it: what is the real source of this dukkha? But being able to name it as dukkha in its universal quality, being able to see it as one more instance of the first noble truth—this is the beginning of the kind of insight where the noble truth of dukkha comes to be fully understood moment by moment.

Now, there's another point I want to make in relation to dukkha that is kind of delicate, about opening to the first noble truth. As I've said, it's not an easy truth to be with. We have a built-in bias not to see it. It's part of the Buddha's teaching that goes against the stream. How can we learn to relate?

If we don't stay in touch with this noble truth, then our normal—what are called vipalasa—our illusory way of perceiving the world will lead us to believe that there is permanence, lasting happiness, and a self. And we will project into the future this safe and cozy plateau, whether it be through external things or through internal meditative states. And we will aim our lives into the future to land there—putting our happiness into the future based on an illusory wish. Clearly, this is misleading and involves us in more delusion.

But the other thing is that if we start to dwell on the concept of dukkha a lot, we can start to see the whole world in terms of dukkha. And then we really start to feel that gloom that's sometimes attributed to Buddhism, and we go, "Oh my God, everything is dukkha. Life is dukkha. My life is dukkha. My friend's life is dukkha. Everybody's life is dukkha."

But the problem with this is we have taken an insight and converted it into a belief. We are not seeing the true nature of things moment by moment. We've taken one experience, held on to that as a generalized view of the world, and then stapled it everywhere: "It's like that, it's like that, it's like that, it's like that." So basically what we're doing is clinging to a view. But when an insight is turned into a view, it's no longer true. An insight needs to be of how things are here and now. If we form a view about the world as being dukkha, then that covers over the living reality. Because there are many, many moments in the day when there is not—I'll say it—when there is not dukkha. Generally, these moments slip by us, and we don't notice those either. But I'll talk about this when we get to the third noble truth at another time.

So the intention of the first noble truth is not so that you'll get gloomy and develop an aversion about life.

That's not the point, and it's a misapplication. It's converting a truth into a view.

The Buddha said this: "A practitioner is not overwhelmed by suffering and does not overwhelm himself with suffering. She does not give up the pleasure that accords with Dhamma, yet she is not infatuated with that pleasure." And many of the suttas that talk about the development of the factors of enlightenment and the higher qualities of the path speak of aspects of happiness, joy, and rapture as being integral to the evolution of the path.

So in order to understand suffering, it doesn't work to be overwhelmed by it. We have to be able to—Ajahn Sumedho likes this phrase—stand under it. That means we have to be able to support it on our own shoulders as we're standing up straight. We

have to be able to hold it. Or he says, embrace it, accept it. In order to understand suffering, we have to be able to let it be in our lives just as it is and still be upright, still be dignified, still be ennobled.

So how can we do that? Let me ask you: has suffering ever been useful in your practice? Have you ever learned anything? Has it ever opened qualities of heart or mind? What have you found through connecting with suffering?

Compassion. Suffering is said to be the proximate cause of compassion. Empathy—being able to feel another's suffering from feeling and opening to our own. Impermanence—investigation of suffering leads to seeing impermanence, so wisdom is cultivated. Appreciation—experiencing suffering can really make us appreciate the times that are free from it. Patience. Strength. Confidence: I can bear this, I can understand it, I can work with it.

So in many ways, suffering is a training ground for the pāramīs. We grow, we develop, and we open through a wise relationship to suffering. But it depends on us not being overwhelmed by it. We have to find that inner strength that lets us maintain our balance while relating to it, while understanding it, while feeling it, coming into contact. That really is the power of equanimity. When equanimity is present, it gives us that strength to learn from suffering.

One actor that I always really enjoy seeing in movies is Morgan Freeman. I recently read a little bit about his life story. He was born in 1937, so he turned seventy this year, and he grew up in Mississippi. Being an African-American young man in Mississippi through the thirties, forties, and fifties would not have been a primarily happy experience, I have the feeling. And yet when you look at his character today, I feel an incredible amount of dignity and self-respect in his bearing. I don't know if you're aware of this, but he was the actor chosen in two different movies to play the character of God. That's kind of a testament to his character. I don't know many people who could play God very well, but he was pretty good.

Sally and I were in New York last fall. We went to a Broadway show—it happened to be Spamalot, which was not particularly dignified, but it was a lot of fun. When we came out of the theater after the show, probably around eleven o'clock, there was Morgan Freeman walking down the sidewalk toward us with a woman he was with. He was dressed in a black wool overcoat, and he looked just like a character out of his movies. Tall and dignified, and you could just see the crowd of people parting in advance of his wake. He has, to me, a wonderful bearing and character. And I have to believe that a lot of that was learned in dealing with the adverse circumstances of growing up as a black man in a racist culture.

So there are many things that we can learn from suffering when we can bear it, when we are not overwhelmed by it—but we need to see it clearly moment after moment. One of the ways that we know we haven't fully understood dukkha is that we keep chasing things. If we really understood dukkha and the true meaning of impermanence, the thoroughgoingness of impermanence, we wouldn't chase material things, we wouldn't chase people, and we wouldn't chase meditation experiences.

So to the extent that we still do those things, those are signs that we still have a way to go in the full understanding of dukkha.

Also along the lines of the ennobling quality of dukkha, Ajahn Chah said this, which you've probably heard before, but I love this reflection. He said, "There is suffering that leads to more suffering, and there is suffering that leads to the end of suffering."

Now I wonder what makes the difference between those two. We see a lot of suffering in the world that seems to lead to more suffering. There seems to be this spiral of violence and unhappiness and pursuit of materialism going on in the world today. So what is the kind of suffering that leads to the end of suffering? Or better, we should say, what is the quality of mind that can transform suffering toward the end of suffering?

I think one aspect is this base of equanimity—that we have to be strong enough to be able to bear it. The other is an interest. If we have an interest to learn from that suffering, that brings in a very wholesome factor of mind. This sort of interest and investigative quality is the second of the enlightenment factors. The first is mindfulness, which gets us there and puts us in touch with what's happening. The second is that we want to investigate how that suffering is arising, how it's being sustained, and how it can be ended.

So if we get interested in suffering, this is really, I would say, the turning point that starts to lead us toward using that as the end of suffering. We have lots of opportunities in this retreat to see that, as I'm sure you've noticed. That simple practice of turning the attention to the attitude of mind, seeing if there's wanting, seeing if there's not wanting, seeing if there's delusion—those are pointers to conflict, to struggle, or having an agenda. They point to some way we may be in conflict with our situation and therefore in some degree of suffering, either gross or subtle.

If we can take that opportunity to learn what leads to suffering, how does it get created, how can it be released, and how can it be ended—that's the investigation that we're here for.

I heard a teacher giving a Dharma talk recently, and he said something like, "Changing the conditions that lead to suffering is what our practice is about. There is no other practice than this." Changing the conditions that lead to suffering is what our practice is all about. There is no other practice than this.

It is only through our own wisdom that we can change those conditions. We can't do it by force of will. Or maybe a better way to say it is that it is only wisdom that can change those conditions, not force of will. So we have to look, investigate, attend, be interested, be curious, until the wisdom itself reveals to us suffering, its cause, and its end. And if we are patient and we stay with that experience, knowing it as the first noble truth, the wisdom will reveal that to us. The wisdom will unfold the way out.

I didn't get to the cause of suffering tonight, so we're halfway there. We'll do that another night. But I just want to end with the Buddha's formulation from this same discourse, from the same sutta, of the third noble truth, just to point to the direction of the teaching. This is what the Buddha had to say about the third noble truth:

"This is the noble truth of the end of suffering. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of craving, the giving up and relinquishment of it, freedom from it, nonreliance on it."

That is the end of suffering.

CHAPTER 29

Habits of Mind

Carol Wilson · 57 min

> *In this profound retreat talk, Carol Wilson examines the habitual patterns of mind that perpetuate our suffering—the automatic pursuit of pleasure, avoidance of pain, and the persistent illusion that the universe centers around our individual self. Drawing on teachings from Bhikkhu Bodhi, Ajahn Sumedho, and the Buddha's discourse on the luminous mind, she illuminates how these deeply conditioned responses shape our experience even when we sincerely practice meditation.*
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> *Wilson explores the Buddha's teaching on vedanā (feeling tone) and how quickly the mind moves from a simple pleasant or unpleasant experience into elaborate stories and reactions. She references the Buddha's teaching on the two darts—how we compound our suffering by resisting unpleasant experience and chasing pleasant sense impressions as our only known escape. The talk addresses how even sincere spiritual motivation can subtly morph into self-centered striving when not supported by discerning wisdom.*
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> *The heart of the teaching points toward a radical shift: rather than trusting our thoughts, preferences, and habitual reactions, we can learn to trust awareness itself—what Ajahn Sumedho calls "the point that includes." Wilson emphasizes that this luminous knowing quality of mind is always available, doesn't require changing our experience, and can be recognized simply by releasing our entrancement with objects and reactions. This cultivation of mind, as the Buddha taught, isn't about making awareness purer but about feeding the attachments less while increasingly recognizing and trusting the knowing quality that is naturally free.*

The other day, or maybe it was only yesterday, I mentioned in the morning how it can be helpful to take a moment to reflect, to connect with our deeper motivation, that faith which keeps us going. This morning in the instructions, Guy also spoke about moment-to-moment intention, but in the questions I could hear it morph into the bigger sense of our motivation.

I want to begin by reminding us that mostly I'm just talking about things we all know tonight—just reminding us of what we already know. This practice, both the external form and the internal work that we're doing, goes against the stream of society. That's how it is now, and that's how it was at the time of the Buddha. He said it himself: it's like swimming upstream against the normal flow of society.

If you've been here for six weeks, there's no question, but even if you've been here for one week, you know that there are times—sometimes fleeting, sometimes quite long—when you really need to be able to reconnect, to call on your motivation, to call on your faith. Our usual way of thinking, the way of being in the world that we've been taught from our culture, can't always sustain what we're doing here. As someone said today, practice is going fine, and then the mind says, "Okay, I'm out of here. Time to go to that beach. Time to do whatever."

The way we're brought up, the way we live, we believe all this stuff. The mind says something, we think, "Yeah, that's right," and we do it. The next minute it says something else, and we think, "Oh yeah, that's right too." And we do that, and we wonder why we're crazy. In the world, in normal society, that's what we do—we just follow the habits of the mind.

In some ways, that's one of the great things about an intensive retreat structure like this: the fact that we're all here together. Other times that's the difficult thing, but at those moments when we really think, "What am I doing? It's so hard to just keep paying attention," we look around and there are all these people also doing it. We think, maybe I'm not completely insane.

That's externally—we find something to strengthen our faith, to strengthen our motivation. Whatever got us started in our practice in the beginning, whatever inspired us initially, it's called bright faith in the way the Burmese speak about it. Maybe someone you met really inspired you, or talked about the Dhamma, or inspired you in how they were. Maybe something you read. Whatever it was, it lights us up. It gives us energy. One of the definitions of faith, or saddhā, is confidence, willingness to do. That gets us here, gets us started. Sometimes that's what we need to call on in the hard moments.

You might have a little short snippet of something you read—tiny, tiny, little short thing—not books and books, not forty talks on one CD, but some little thing that inspires us, that reminds us of bright faith. Or looking at the statue of the Buddha, or reflecting on people that we've known. I think why people talk about the Dalai Lama so much is because he's such an inspiring figure in that way. We need this.

We also need to be able to tune in internally to what's our deepest motivation, as I said the other morning, because external bright faith gets us going, but it doesn't keep us going through the most difficult times. Luckily, as we begin to have more experience for ourselves, the bright faith, the external inspiration, gets verified.

One of the wonderful things about the way wisdom arises in our mind through paying attention, through awareness, is that you only need one little short second of wisdom, of insight. That can balance weeks of slogging through. Thank God it doesn't have to be equal airtime, or we'd really be in trouble. You're going days and days and weeks, and then—"Oh, I see. It's all empty. It's no problem." And it really is no problem.

So the big mystery, really—the big mystery of our life, of how our mind works, of the habit of mind, of spiritual practice—to me the big mystery is this: why, when it's so clear there's no problem, when it's so clear that really nothing that's happening matters, why do we get sucked in again? Two seconds after we see, "Wow, that's just craving, and the suffering is the craving," why do we turn around and go crazy because the last banana's gone?

You know? Why? And we can watch the mind doing this and go, "But it's just craving. It shouldn't bother me. It shouldn't bother me, but..." We can't kid ourselves. Now it does bother me. And why does it bother me? That bothers me. And then we get spinning, spinning.

So this is the habits of our mind. And that's mostly what I want to speak about tonight.

The faith, reconnecting with our motivation—it's essential. It's inspiring. It takes us out of the known. It takes us out of the normal cultural world, what we've been used to. And that's really what the practice of awakening is. It's looking at our life, our minds, our bodies from a different perspective. And to do that, we need to create a little space.

But sincere motivation needs to be supported by discerning wisdom. Just the most sincere motivation in the world, the bright faith—it gets us going. But until we start to really have verified experiences, until we really start to see through things for ourselves, even for a second, then with the best will in the world, with the most sincere motivation—"I'm really here to wake up, to serve all beings," whatever—our motivation is very sincere, and honor your motivation. But it takes just a little turn of the mind for it to morph into, "Well, what am I getting from this retreat? What's this practice doing for me? How is my practice doing? How am I progressing compared to everyone else?" You know all the different ways of that. And it slips in so subtly, doesn't it, that we don't really notice.

So without the discerning wisdom, we get caught—really, with the most sincere motivation, practicing for whatever reason we're practicing—but the attitude, the mind that's paying attention, is caught in the old habits. What we're doing is shifting our focus of interest, shifting what we trust.

His Holiness, speaking of the Dalai Lama, says, "The purpose of our spiritual practice is to fulfill our desire for happiness, for peace. We are all equal in wishing to be happy and to overcome our suffering. And I believe we all share the right to fulfill this aspiration."

So he uses the H word—happiness. That's a big word these days. I was in a bookstore a couple of weeks ago, just a regular bookstore, not spiritual, and looking at one of the tables where they lay out books to display. It wasn't the spiritual table either. It was just one of the tables in the middle of the store, a lot of books. So I started counting. There were fourteen books with the word "happiness" in the title on this table. And as I say, a couple of them were spiritual, but the rest weren't. That's—yeah, we'd like to be happy. There's nothing wrong with wanting to be happy. As His Holiness says, that's normal motivation. The Buddha taught suffering and the end of suffering, you know.

But without wise discernment, without understanding ourselves, the nature of happiness, the nature of suffering accurately, the choices we make—all too unfortunately—in our deep motivation for happiness are not coming from wisdom. The motivation may be sincere, but without understanding ourselves and the world accurately, it doesn't work, right? Samsara doesn't work. That's why I think we're all sitting here. If it worked, we wouldn't have to do things like this. We could just follow our intuition, follow our basic instincts.

So this practice works internally against the stream—the stream of society, the stream of our mental habits, those patterns so familiar they feel natural, appropriate, trustworthy. The real question, what we're actually shifting in our practice, is: where do we place our trust? Where do we place our confidence, moment to moment to moment?

One of the big places in normal life, in the stream of culture—this culture anyway—is that we really trust our thoughts. On another level this is laughable, having sat and actually looked at your thoughts, but we trust them. We trust our explanations of things, our rationalizations, our descriptions. When something happens and we can't explain it right away, we don't like that very much. Fear comes up.

Even if on an intellectual level we can all say we know our minds are crazy, we know thoughts aren't reliable, notice how often when you come into an interview or when you're spinning in some kind of struggle, it's because we're either believing in or reacting to our thought process. Our habits, our instincts aren't reliable, but it's hard for us to see it.

I read a review—I didn't read the book, just the review, which gives you a lot of information—of a book called *How Doctors Think*, written by a doctor. It's really interesting because I don't think doctors think any differently from the rest of us; this just happens to be about doctors. He said that misdiagnoses, which are of course often made because no one knows everything, only about twenty percent are accounted for by technical mistakes—machine errors, not reading handwriting correctly. By far the majority of misdiagnoses result from habits of mind that cause doctors to make snap judgments or overlook alternative possibilities. And remember, this isn't just doctors. It's all of us.

He gives a couple of examples. The author's own son almost died at nine months old from an intestinal obstruction because the pediatrician assumed that the parents, being first-time parents, were overreacting to a normal virus. The doctor didn't really look carefully, and the baby almost died. Or other times, when a doctor makes a diagnosis and sends the patient to specialists, because of that first diagnosis the specialists by far in majority start by already thinking it's that. They're much more likely to confirm than to actually look fresh and see whether it's that or not.

Does that sound familiar? "I already know what this is. I labeled this yesterday. I don't have to look at it again. This is what fear is like, now and always."

Diagnoses may also be wrong because the doctor stereotypes, paying more attention to the patient's age or race or living habits. I've read a lot about how women's heart attacks are much more frequently missed than men's because the assumption is that men have heart attacks more frequently than women—which isn't really true. Emotions also interfere. A doctor may like a patient too much to consider a worst-case scenario, or they may not like the patient and so don't listen to important complaints. "Just a whiner. I'm not going to really pay attention."

You see how our minds can do that with ourselves, right? I don't need to draw the obvious parallels anymore. But this is really the power of moment-to-moment mindfulness—this willingness to just meet freshly, without bringing the whole baggage of all our preconceptions. That's the idea. Simple but not easy. We don't even know what preconceptions are there half the time. We think we're meeting something freshly, just like the doctors.

This is from Sayadaw U Janaka: "We practice vipassana in order to live in happiness, to be free from suffering. Our suffering arises due to our suffering mental states, and these arise due to our belief in personality view, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. And *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, personality view, arises due to our incorrect understanding of the nature of mental and physical experience."

So it keeps coming down very simply to the nature of this moment-to-moment mental and physical experience. Going against the stream means recognizing that much of the time we don't even see what we already think we know. We're looking through that veil. We're not meeting mental experience, physical experience, freshly. And in our motivation, our real wanting to be happy, we assess and make choices for our happiness based on misunderstanding what happiness is, what can make us happy, what even we are—never mind what can make us happy. All based on these really deeply inlaid habits of mind.

I heard on public radio yesterday—I think it's the ninetieth anniversary of the revolution in Russia in 1917. They were interviewing people on the street, talking about how the last decade or so in Russia has been so chaotic that some people are yearning, have a kind of nostalgia, for the stability of the Stalinist era.

Even though it's known now, it's not a secret anymore that some 20 million Russians were killed in the gulag. That's not a secret anymore. So this one woman, they were talking to her on the street, and she said, "Yeah, people say he murdered half of Russia, but still, he had a unique personality." There are not many people like him. You have to be someone special to be able to have all that power in your hands. And this was in an admiring kind of way.

We think we know what will make us happy. It's chaotic. Okay, I love stability. Take it from Russia to you're sitting here on the pillow, but you get the drift. It's chaotic. If I could just have everything stay the same for a while, then I'd be happy. Then I'd see how things are. So get rid of all this stuff. We think we know. We don't have a clue.

Bhikkhu Bodhi—do you know who Bhikkhu Bodhi is? He's an American man, actually from Brooklyn, who has been an ordained bhikkhu in the Theravada tradition for many, many years. He lived in Sri Lanka. Now he lives in the States. He is one of the foremost translators from the Pali into English of the Buddhist scriptures, extremely learned. He's also very humble, a really wonderful person.

So he's writing this: "Remember that the Buddha's teaching goes against the current of one's habitual assumptions and attitudes. After all, most of our habits revolve around the desire to enjoy pleasure, to avoid pain, and to preserve the illusion that the universe centers around our individual self."

I want to repeat that. See if you can recognize anything here. Most of our habits, the habits of our mind—and these are the habits that drive our choices, more than our choices, our assumptions about what will make us happy—the desire to enjoy pleasure, to avoid pain, and to preserve the illusion that the universe centers around our indi-

vidual self. When one's personal experience of suffering becomes vivid enough, then it will induce one to become disillusioned or disenchanted with these habits and to begin to place our trust in something else.

He says in the Buddhist disclosures on reality, but I think what we start in this practice to see and place our trust in is mindfulness, awareness, consciousness itself, rather than placing our trust in pleasure making us happy, displeasure causing our suffering. Rather than placing our trust in "everything centers around me, me, me." We don't even know half the time that that's what the mind is doing.

I read this on the back of *The Inquiring Mind* from Francisco Varela, the scientist: "The purpose of calming the mind in Buddhism is not so much to become absorbed, but to render the mind able to be present with itself long enough to gain insight into its own nature and functioning."

That's exactly what we're doing here. Just allowing the mind to quiet enough to turn around and look at itself, to see what's the nature of mind and how does it function. And to do that, moment by moment by moment, we have to be able, just for a moment, to put down our preconceptions, to put down our ideas about what makes us happy, our preferences, and just meet this arising experience as it is. Trusting that insight, understanding, discriminating wisdom is a natural function of moment-to-moment awareness.

Do we trust that? Sometimes, maybe. But a lot of times, what are we putting our trust in? These habits, right? They're so ingrained. They're so deep in our life. That's what the Buddha saw when he woke up—that everyone wants to be happy and keeps doing in their effort to be happy just the thing that makes them keep on suffering.

We see something isn't working in our daily life. So here we are, really sincerely. But until we recognize that these habits are kind of the lens through which we're experiencing moment-to-moment reality and making choices, until we start to see that, we come here and we bring the same habits to a meditation retreat as we bring to how we live our life.

Even when we say sit down, just be aware of whatever's happening by itself, there's still a sense we're doing something. You're sitting down. You're shutting up. You're turning your attention inside, hopefully noticing once in a while what comes and goes. Already that's some direction, that's some activity.

And so how are we going to approach any new activity when we're not in the freshness of awareness? With the same old habits. We approach it, we put forth effort in order to achieve a result that is pleasant. I mean, how many of you here are really working with virya in order to experience more unpleasant? Do you think of waking up as including unpleasant experience?

When you really look at it deeply, what's in our mind—isn't there somehow a bias that the more we wake up, the more pleasant everything's going to be? The ending of suffering somehow has a connotation of pleasant. Somehow, even though there's pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, all that unpleasant is just going to fall away, and it's all going to be nice, floating on clouds. I know it sounds exotic, but look, just watch next time you're having a little hissy fit about what's happening in your practice, and see if you're having a problem because it's pleasant. Probably not.

So the effort is usually for some result—because that's what we've learned—usually pleasant. And in any case, it's somehow going to confirm me, a sense of how I can assess myself. It fulfills me. It confirms me. It gives me a sense that I'm getting somewhere, that I'm more empty than I was when I started this retreat. That sense of it's all about me.

And then we trust our thoughts so much. When you sit there and start thinking, "Well, if it's not all about me and there isn't any me, how am I going to do it?" And why do we get so caught in that? Because what's getting stronger? The more we think about that, the sense of me, me, me. I'm losing me. Oh my God.

So that's our habit. That's what we know. We bring the same thing to the meditation, and that's how we get into the striving. It doesn't have to be this way. I'm not saying this is what's going to happen and there's no way out of it. I'm just pointing it out so that we can begin to notice when there's this sense of looking ahead, when there's this sense of striving, when there's a sense of somehow it isn't going right, "I thought I would be further along by now"—to see that and ask, "Oh, what habit's driving the bus right now?" It's all about me. It should be more pleasant. It's looking into the experience. We're trusting in that moment our trying to organize and manipulate and arrange experience to meet some cockamamie idea we have that we heard or we read or we made up.

Instead of turning around and saying, just trust in this moment, only for this moment, the awareness. The simplicity of just the awareness of knowing in this moment. Hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, sensing with the body, sensing with the mind. And it doesn't matter what. It really doesn't matter what.

Ajahn Sumedho calls awareness the point that includes. Really trusting that awareness in one moment—not extended in time as some thing existing, but just in the moment. That moment of pure awareness, the consciousness aware of what's happening without the coloring of wanting or aversion or me, me, me. Just this sensation. Just this hearing. Just this pleasant. Just this unpleasant. Moment after moment after moment. That continuity. It's a very different possibility. And it's so subtle.

Always accessible. So familiar. Even more familiar, if possible, than the habits of wanting and aversion and "it's all about me." But completely intangible—nothing you can really point to or hold on to. Just this. Oh, this.

The practice is really about turning our interest, our trust, our love, our confidence—whatever word works for you—devotion, away from whatever experience or object is arising. You know it's there, but it's going to come, it's going to go. No matter how fantastic or horrible, it's going to come, it's going to go. And when it's gone, it's gone like it never existed.

I don't care how incredible an experience we have. I don't care how horrible and fearful it is. It's going to go, and it'll be really gone, and it'll be like it never existed. When you think about it, just get that taste. It happens more as we get older, so maybe you younger people don't have the feeling yet, although it's true for all of us. I see it with my mother; I see it more with me now. All the stuff that happened in my whole life—it's nothing but a thought. It's just nothing. I couldn't tell you if I feel fifty-six or two. It doesn't really matter. It's just a concept because it's only now.

And when there's that freedom of only now, we don't have to cling on so much for dear life to what's arising, physical or mental. It's just—ah—awareness, experience in the knowing of it, hearing in the knowing of it, thinking in the knowing of it. And we can come to trust, to have confidence, to love the knowing of it. That's really the shift that this whole practice is about.

In those moments—those moments I mentioned at the beginning—when it's really so clear, there's no problem. Sometimes we think there's no problem because we've hit into a really pleasant, lovely state, but that's a problem because it goes, and then we see it's a problem. But the kind of no problem where there's nothing special happening, just that—no clinging, no aversion, not me-centric—just this thing, nothing special, always available. Those moments are really the heart of this practice.

We lose it. We get caught up again. We get focused back into experience, into manipulating experience, into trying. And those are the habits that Bhikkhu Bodhi talks about. Fascinating. Fascinating how we keep getting sucked back in. And if we can bring interest to that rather than incredible frustration and dismay, it's helpful. If you can just see—it's fascinating.

It continues to be fascinating to me that I really, on some level, and sometimes I really get it: nothing that I can experience is going to make me ultimately happy. It never has. It won't last. It really doesn't matter. I know that. And sometimes I really know that. And then I turn around and my thinking knows it, but that's basically useless. And it's like, no, I've got to have this. This headache has to go away and then I'll be happy. And all the resistance and all the wanting and all the sense of struggle.

What's happening? Oh, just this. Just as it is. Because it's not about the experience. Oh yes, awareness. It's like this. The point that includes. Awareness can be aware with anything. So our practice comes to be more noticing the awareness than the knowing. Noticing when we're not noticing it. Noticing what experiences or thoughts or actions we somehow place outside.

Awareness can't be present if this is happening. We all do it. And then at some point, after we struggle—you struggle for an hour, you struggle for a day, you struggle for three days—something in the mind lets go. "All right, this is just this. That's okay." All the clinging went away. We took confidence again in the awareness. It's just like a Tai Chi move.

When we're caught in relationship to experience—this should be different, this should be better, this should last, this should go away, this means this about me (and that's the big one)—when we're caught in that, it's endless struggle. Like trying to rearrange the furniture in prison and not seeing that the door's always open.

But we don't have to change anything. We don't have to change anything. You don't have to be a better person, a different person, have a better personality or a different personality. You don't have to have better concentration. You don't have to walk slower or faster. You do have to be interested. But awareness is not some special thing, like some people have an awareness power. It's just the nature of how the mind works.

The Tai Chi move is withdrawing the identification from the relationship, from our entrancement with our reaction to what's happening, and just noticing the knowing. Just noticing the knowing. There's nothing you can judge that by. There's nothing you

can confirm yourself by. But when there's that withdrawing of relational reaction to experience and just that movement into the knowing, just like that, it's completely different.

The Buddha, when he woke up—as far as we can tell, he woke up into the same world, didn't he? It's not the world that changed. He still had a body, still had a mind. He got headaches. He had backaches. He ate bad food. What changes is the relation. The happiness isn't about getting better experience. It's about understanding the nature of mind and body—the coming, the going. It's not about me. It's not that we just get pleasant. It's not that the suffering is the unpleasant. The waking up is that knowing, knowing, knowing.

When we talk about emptiness, it's not that there's nothing. It's just that there's no solid, long, permanent, lasting entity in anything. But everything's still here. It's just that we withdraw our tenacious hold, our relational reactivity, our entrancement with experience and our reactions to experience, our entrancement with what everything means about me or to me.

And if you think I'm exaggerating, just notice as you go through the days. With humor—it helps. Humor helps. Notice how almost everything that happens—not quite everything, but almost anything—how quick does the mind get it back to what it means to me? Just somebody walks through the dining room on the other side. How quick does that have something to say about me? "Oh, look how they're walking. They look pretty mindful. I'm not as mindful as they are." Or, "That's the person who was breathing loudly this morning. They really bugged me—but I'm so equanimous, it doesn't matter." It doesn't take any time. Somebody puts food on their plate, and immediately: how does that relate to me? Just notice this, and notice the difference when the thought is, "Oh, I'm really such a lousy meditator."

Oh, awareness of judging. You don't have to get rid of anything. Awareness doesn't care. I love the way Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about it. He says, "You know, it's like this." So judging feels like this. "I really am so caught up and frustrated" — this is like this. Sleepiness is impossible to meditate with — sleepiness is like this. There's nothing that needs to be different. Awareness can be aware of anything. Anything.

I don't know if you can get a sense of how truly liberating that is. The thing is, we have to be interested enough. It's not like, "Okay, two moments a day I'll be aware and just have that freedom, and the rest of the time I'll just run around seeking pleasure and avoiding the unpleasant." That strengthens that habit. So what we're doing with this austere structure here is to support our moving into noticing the knowing — just to support that.

If we're willing to have that steadiness through the day, not of striving to make something different, it's really liberating. "Oh, all I have to do is just notice what's happening all day." And whatever's happening, we can notice it. Doesn't that feel much more relaxing than "I somehow have to twist and turn my experience and get it like this, and then I can notice it, and then I can feel like I'm getting somewhere in meditation" — and oh my God, I'm so exhausted.

Someone was just saying to me today how they'd had a day or two where it was just this sense of things happening and the knowing of it, and there wasn't much reactivity or aversion in the mind. And suddenly when they woke up in the morning, unusually there wasn't tiredness. There was just this brightness, this clarity in the mind because there's no struggle anymore. All the energy that goes into our running after the pleasant and avoiding the unpleasant and constructing the whole world every moment — making a new construction of the world about me and then reacting to it — it's exhausting. Just think: we don't have to do it.

And you don't even have to get rid of that either. Just shift from our entrancement to the knowing. And then when we're not noticing that again, we'll know because we're struggling again. "Oh, struggle. It's like this." It's just all day long. And it's really a whole different possibility.

So in that way, any appearance, any object, serves as a conduit back to awareness, back to knowing. There's nothing that's a distraction. There's nothing that needs to be a problem. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral — a problem is just another word for struggle, and struggle? Oh, struggle's like this.

Really, the times when I'm knowing that, it's so free, so lovely. And you're just the same old person. You don't get a new personality, but you don't care anymore. Other people may care, but that's their problem.

But I do want to emphasize — I know Guy spoke about right attitude the first night, and that's the point. This love of awareness, confidence in awareness — it's really the quality of knowing that is, you want to say, the pure mind, the luminous mind. That's the sutta of the Buddha's that I'll read in a minute. It's awareness that is not colored by wanting, by aversion, or by delusion. There could be other beautiful qualities present. There can be calm. There could be compassion. There could be wisdom. There could be rapture, interest, investigation. It's not like nothing is there, but it won't be colored by these afflictive torments of the mind, which keep us from recognizing nāma-rūpa, mind and matter, accurately — and then keep us spinning in this confusion.

I just want to read this. I'm sure most of you are familiar with it, but it's really just the shift. From the Buddha: "Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, but it is colored by the attachments that visit it."

This unlearned people do not really understand, and so they do not cultivate the mind. We don't understand, we don't recognize the pure, luminous, just empty quality of knowing of the mind. We get entranced by the attachments, by the kilesas, by the wanting, and that's what we spend our life and our time in relationship to. That's what unlearned people don't understand.

"Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, and it is free of the attachments that visit it. This the noble follower of the way really understands, and so for them there is cultivation of the mind."

That's what we're doing—cultivating. When we say cultivation of the mind, it's not that the mind somehow needs improving. That moment of awareness is always luminous and pure. The attachments, the greed, the aversion, the kilesas that come—they come and go. When we're entranced by them, we just don't notice the luminous, pure quality. But even when the attachments are there, it's not that they can ever really stain or affect that luminous pure quality.

So when we know that, and that's where we have just a moment of insight, we go, "Oh, right, just knowing is like this." That touches us so deeply because we see, oh, that's really how it is. And it's like that in any moment. We just forget.

So when the Buddha talks about the noble follower of the way cultivating the mind, it doesn't mean somehow we can control and make that moment of knowing, that moment of awareness, more pure. It's that we learn to have confidence in that more. And we feed the wanting, we feed the attachment less and less and less. So in any moment when we're going, "I've got to have this, I need this," and there's so much suffering—when we see, "Oh, it's like this"—that's a movement from feeding the attachment to confidence in awareness. In that moment, we're no longer feeding the kilesa. That's cultivation of the mind.

It's not in our power to make awareness any clearer, any better. It doesn't need to be. We just learn to recognize more and more frequently and to trust that—to trust that over our assessments and our evaluations and our judgments and our ideas about ourselves. To trust that over our deeply rooted sense that somehow if it's unpleasant, something's wrong and I've got to fix it. That I can't possibly be free with this going on. Instead, we see: "Oh, it's like this."

Even when I say that, probably in the back of your mind you're thinking, "Yeah, yeah, right. Easy for you to say." But the question is, where do we place our trust? And it's not something we can just have an idea about. It's a deeply experiential thing that cuts underneath these habits of mind over and over and over.

So how do we get so tricked back? There are lots of ways, but I just want to highlight something that Guy spoke about in the instructions today. This sense of vedana, this feeling quality where the mind experiences a sound, a sight, a smell, a taste, a thought, a sensation—experiences it as being pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. That's not something inherent in the experience. That's how it's experienced in the mind in that moment. The so-called same experience, the sound, you could experience as pleasant one moment, neutral another moment, unpleasant another moment.

Because we so often don't notice that—and this is one of the subtle experiences that happens almost every moment—it's so quick and fast that we often don't even recognize, "Oh, the pleasant or unpleasant is happening." And right away, that's when the thoughts go into: pleasant is good, this is what should be happening. Or unpleasant is bad, this shouldn't be happening. And that happens so quickly.

There's an unpleasant sensation. You don't even recognize that. The mind goes, "This is pain. Something's wrong with my knee. What's going to happen? There's five more weeks." And in no time, you're in the hospital. It's gone so far, so fast. Mingyur Rinpoche has a great way of describing this.

We get into so much pain and confusion by letting ourselves get lost in the thoughts of whatever happens. Sogyal Rinpoche describes this beautifully: you project a thought, then a second thought believes the first thought. Then the third, fourth, and fifth thoughts are projected. And by this time, the first thought has become absolute reality. By the time the tenth thought comes—and that's about this much time—it believes that the fifth has always been so. Explore that. And then we're just running on that. No wonder we don't have a clue what's going on half the time.

So this is one way we get tricked with this pleasant-unpleasant-neutral dynamic. For the noble follower of the way, as the Buddha said, there's cultivation of the mind. One of the ways we cultivate is by what we're doing here—just our interest, this quality of quieting the mind just enough, as Francisco Varela said, to look and see how it works. Notice, without judgment, out of interest. Notice, as Ajahn Buddhadasa said, how much of what you do is for the sake of pleasant feeling. And notice how long pleasant feeling actually lasts. A feeling, vedana—like that, like that, like that. It's so quick. But just keep noticing how much of what we do is enthralled to trying to get more pleasant or to get away from unpleasant. Unpleasant also—like that, like that.

Neutral—well, we think we want calm. People think they want calm. I can't tell you how often people come in and it's often quite a surprise: it's calm, what's wrong? It's calm, I'm bored. It's calm, what's going to happen to me? It's calm, I've got to do something. And in fact, often people see—I've seen it myself—that the mind will just start creating all kinds of suffering scenarios rather than stay with calm. Neutral? I'm out of here. Back to basic instinct again.

But this is, again, where our practice, our understanding of how things really are, the true source of happiness, runs counter—running against the stream of the world again. This sense of going after pleasant, avoiding unpleasant, it's all about me. On some level we trust it—not reliably, but we trust it. It sort of holds our world together. This is what makes sense to us. This is how we've lived our lives. I mean, when people are really in a suffering thing and you come in and say, "Oh great, just notice it's unpleasant"—most people don't go, "Oh, thank you so much, that really helped. That's what I came here for."

It holds our world together. And in fact, the Buddha said in his sutta about the two darts that when a normal, unawakened person experiences an unpleasant feeling, an unpleasant vedana, the only escape they know from unpleasant feeling is to lust after sense pleasure. And so when there's unpleasant, we pull away. He says it's as if we're hit with a dart and then we hit ourselves with a second dart. This is unpleasant and this is really bad. I don't like it. I've got to do something. We shoot ourselves with a second arrow.

So we have the habit in our mind of pulling away, of resisting and resenting unpleasant. And then—to me, this is so poignant because it really resonates as true—the only escape normal, regular people know from unpleasant is to go and get some pleasant sense experience. So that's life: running between avoiding the unpleasant and going to get something pleasant. Food, sex, relationships, sleep. Sleep's a big one—a big pleasant experience here especially, right? Food's limited, sex is out, but sleep...

It takes a lot of vision, a lot of faith, a lot of courage to step out of that way of being. And I feel so personally fortunate—I'm so grateful every day to know that there's a path, to know that there's another way of being, to know that this isn't the end.

Because really, imagine before you knew there was a path of awakening and all you knew was to get more pleasant. That's how saṃsāra doesn't work. Because sooner or later, it doesn't work. But if that was all there was, how sad would that be?

So here we are. We get lost often in thinking it's only about getting pleasant, only about feeling good, only about what confirms me. But then again, we remember: no, I can turn around again and notice the knowing.

If you went out on the street and said to someone, "Do you know what would be really freeing? If you just noticed the knowing of your footsteps"—I don't think they'd believe you. But actually, it's incredibly radical. It's freeing. It's available every moment with every experience possible. There's nothing that awareness can't be with. Ajahn Sumedho says it's the point that includes. And we simply recognize it by, in a moment, letting go of our entrancements and our absorptions with experience, with objects, with our likes and our dislikes.

I want to end with reading something from Ajahn Sumedho to that effect. He's talking about patience and non-clinging, and he says:

"Buddha wisdom is just this much: knowing the conditioned as the conditioned, the unconditioned as the unconditioned. Buddhas are no longer deluded by any conditions. And so they incline to the spaciousness, the emptiness, rather than towards the changing conditions within the space. In your meditation now, as you incline towards the emptiness, the space"—I would just say the knowing—"your habitual grasping, fascination, revulsions, fears, doubts, and worries about the conditions begins to lessen. You begin to recognize them as just things that come and go. They're not self. They're nothing to get excited about or depressed about. They just are as they are. We can allow conditions to be just as they are because they come and go. Their nature is to go away, so we don't have to make them go away. And in this way, we naturally liberate ourselves from the struggle, the strife, and the confusion of the ignorant mind that has to spend all its time evaluating and discriminating, trying to hold on to something, trying to get rid of something. It means that we exist peacefully rather than complaining, rebelling, and causing more frictions and confusion and adding to the confusion through believing in our own confusion."

We recognize the space just by not clinging to the objects and the reactions to the objects in our experience.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said that habit and passion blind and mislead. Compassionate awareness heals and redeems.

CHAPTER 30

Working With The Judging Mind

Sally Armstrong · 55 min

> *In this insightful talk, Sally Armstrong addresses one of the most pervasive sources of inner suffering: the judging mind. She examines how our capacity for evaluation, while evolutionarily useful and necessary for developing conscience as children, often becomes distorted into a relentless inner critic that undermines our sense of self-worth and separates us from others.*
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> *Drawing on the Buddha's teaching on māna (conceit or comparing mind), Armstrong illuminates how we constantly measure ourselves as better than, worse than, or even equal to others—all forms of judgment that prevent true equanimity. She explores the evolutionary and cultural roots of this tendency, noting how modern civilization's emphasis on specialization and comparison has amplified what Tibetan teacher Tsoknyi Rinpoche calls "the disease of the West."*
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> *Armstrong offers practical approaches for working with the judge: recognizing judgments as simply thoughts arising and passing away, bringing humor and lightness to the practice, using mettā phrases as antidotes, and developing genuine self-acceptance. She shares a powerful personal story of standing at the edge of an "abyss" of self-criticism during a mettā retreat and discovering the choice to accept her experience exactly as it was. The talk emphasizes that working with the judging mind is not peripheral to meditation practice but central to the path of transformation—requiring us to trust our direct experience of inner stillness and goodness over conditioned patterns of self-negation.*

I cut this cartoon out of the Sunday papers a while ago. It's from the strip *Rhymes with Orange* called "As Medicine Advances." The picture depicted is a person, a patient sitting on that examining table in a doctor's office in their little paper gown that one has to wear and feel very vulnerable in, and the doctor reading some results to the patient. And the doctor says, "The MRI confirms it. Your head is full of dumb and repetitive thoughts."

Meditation confirms it, too. This is our common experience as we sit down and pay attention—what we see is the mind just full of this constant commenting, a narration of and about our experience.

Here's another cartoon on it. I really think cartoonists are the modern-day philosophers, especially things like *Peanuts* or *Calvin and Hobbes*. They're what most people get as a form of philosophy. This one is from *Boondocks*—those couple of kids living with their grandfather. They're always a little challenging for him to look after. The two kids are talking to each other, and the first one says, "Sometimes I think my brain works differently than most people's. For example, do you ever, like, narrate your life in your own head as it happens, like it was a History Channel-type documentary?" And the second kid just says, "Nope." But the thought bubble from the second kid says, "And then Caesar's best friend Huey asked him yet another weird and stupid question. It would not be the last."

So we all do it. We just often don't recognize or even want to admit that that is our inner experience—of looking out from behind somewhere there and having a judgment, having a reaction, commenting on everything that happens to us and around us.

The challenge for us is that often this inner voice, this voice that comments, isn't neutral. It's not just very equanimously noting this and that. It's critical. It's judgmental. It's valuing experience over and over again, and it's comparing ourselves and others, past and future, this and that.

There's a book I read because I was interested in this topic by a man called Byron Brown, and he wrote a book called *Soul Without Shame*. This is what he says:

"Judgment is a central element of your inner dialogue, the way you talk to yourself. From that point of view, it is second nature to you, so close to you that it's hard even to become aware of its existence. However, there is a good reason to isolate this part of your inner process. Self-judgment is perhaps the greatest source of inner suffering and discontent. More than that, or because of that, it is one of the major barriers to change, growth, expansion, and transformation."

I think this is true for us in our meditation practice—in my own practice and speaking to people here on this retreat and, of course, many other retreats. Beginning to work directly with this voice of the inner critic is one of the powerful ways our meditation practice can begin this process of transformation and healing and allow us to truly open to the freedom and happiness that's possible for us. So it can become quite a central part of our practice.

We've emphasized over and over again how important acceptance is in this practice, how it leads to equanimity. And working with the judge, this critical voice, is central to opening to a true acceptance of our experience—acceptance of ourselves, acceptance of our experience, and acceptance of others' experience. Acceptance of our body, of our moods, of our emotions, of our thoughts.

Often on retreat, it can seem to us that our judgments actually get exacerbated. "Am I always like this? All I see is judging this, and everywhere I look, instantly there's a judgment." I actually don't think that retreats increase the power of judging. I think that we're often like this, but we're able to distract ourselves or go on to the next thing or get lost in it without bringing this clarity of mindfulness to it, and so we don't notice it as much. But there is also something about the quietness of retreat practice that brings our thoughts into highlight. Perhaps both are true—it both does and doesn't increase it—but we certainly notice it more when we're on retreat. We notice, many of us, the preponderance of how many of the thoughts we have are judging thoughts, are critical thoughts.

And it's not just obviously us here in meditation. Carol spoke yesterday about how many books are out there on happiness. I've looked into this too. I think the balancing of that is how many books there are out there about judging. Because really, unless we open to and work with this judge, true happiness isn't possible for us. One of our colleagues and friends, Tara Brach, a teacher who comes here, wrote a great book called *Radical Self-Acceptance*. At Spirit Rock, we actually have many day-longs and even class series about this tendency to judgment because so many people are wounded by it and want to work with it.

So it's really a very helpful place to work within your practice. And one of the things I think is important to remember: this is not some kind of side issue that you have to get out of the way, or some aberration that you have before you can begin to meditate. You know, "If I could just stop judging..." It's really very central to these deep spiritual questions of who do we take ourselves to be? How do we relate to our inner life and our experience in the world? So not to try and push this aside or find the speedy way around this question of working with the judge—it's really very important to come to a full, open, and investigating practice around it.

For many of us, the early part—and I hesitate to define what early is; it might be one year or two years, or ten or fifteen years—many years can be spent working on this issue of self-acceptance in particular. As I say, it's so central and necessary for us to really begin the difficult work of transformation, of opening to the truths that the Buddha's

path shows us. We have to have this sense of capacity, of trust, of faith in ourselves and our ability to do this work. And so we begin with self-acceptance, with looking very directly at how we relate to our inner landscape.

There's this famous quote from the Buddha where he says, "You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere. You yourself, as much as anyone in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection." Really quite a powerful statement.

But as we open to our inner experience and begin to look directly at the contents of the mind, at the emotions that come up, what we tend to see are the old habits, the patterns. Carol spoke about this last night—just those familiar ruts, grooves that the mind moves in. And we see that for many of us, we've actually learned to be self-critical. One of the habits that we've picked up along the way is this internalized message that we're not good enough. It can operate in all kinds of areas in our life: around our sense of self, our body, our looks, our intellectual abilities, our athletic abilities, how we did in school, how we do at work, relationships—every aspect of our life. And of course, we bring it into our spiritual life as well. Am I a good enough meditator? Am I doing it right? Are they better than me? Who's sitting longest? Who walks the slowest? Everywhere, anything can be fuel for this judging mind.

And it can get so extreme that some people even have the deeply held belief that they're bad, that they're not good in some essential way. Very painful to open to this, but essential—if that's there, we must begin to uncover it, to actually acknowledge that this is something affecting the way we relate to the world. That's the beginning of being able to transform it.

So we need to look at these messages, these habits of mind, if they're there. And I actually think it's helpful to have some sense of how these messages were formed, to have some understanding of the causes and conditions. That's the beginning of the process of transforming them and letting them go. Of course, in meditation it's not therapy, where we need to understand and go into the trauma of five years old and what happened then. It's all about what's happening in the moment. But to see, to whatever extent you feel it's skillful or helpful, the causes and conditions that led to the way you hold yourself now.

The Buddha often talked about this tendency of mind. In Pali, it's called *māna*—conceit, or comparing. And it includes the obvious ones that we're all familiar with: that we're better than, or we're worse than. But interestingly enough, the Buddha also included in this field even "the same as"—that this too is a comparing and evaluating. It's

not letting things just be open the way they are. And it gets very subtle when you include that. "Oh, I'm as good as they are"—it's another form of judging. But the ones we most tend to get caught in are "I'm better than" or "I'm worse than." This is where we spend a lot of time, judging ourselves. And then by extension, we judge others. And because we know we're judging others, of course we have this strong fear, this almost expectation, this projection that they are judging us—and that has a lot of influence on our feeling of self-worth.

As I looked into this, the centrality of this issue and how ubiquitous it seemed to be—both in my own practice, in people I spoke to, and certainly in interviews and conversations with yogis—I just saw how common it was and began reflecting on it. And my own understanding, my own intuition, is that it's very primal. It's almost an animal kind of nature. It wasn't that long ago in evolutionary terms that we had to decide—so quite a while ago, but in evolutionary terms, hundreds of thousands of years ago—we had to decide as animals: do I eat it, or does it eat me? When we met someone new... you see this in wild animals, that's how they relate.

And I read this fascinating book by Jared Diamond called *Guns, Germs, and Steel* that traces the evolution of civilization and why different cultures and civilizations evolved the way they did. He says many interesting things, but one that struck me was this: it's not that long ago—even shorter in evolutionary terms, just a number of thousands of years—that we as humans lived in this way. If we met a stranger, our immediate response had to be: is it friend or foe?

He talks about cultures that had very codified, ritualized ways of coming together to ascertain whether this was someone they were related to, and therefore shouldn't kill, or whether this was a stranger, in which case it was up for grabs. This is still somewhat hardwired in us. Hopefully we've moved quite a way beyond that, but this need to evaluate where I stand in relationship to another when I meet them remains deeply embedded. We can see how this judging tendency emerges from that primal response—an aspect of evolution we still carry around with us.

There's also something that gets distorted as societies change. If you look at tribal societies, how humans evolved for hundreds of thousands of years, we all lived together in tribes and groups where everyone had pretty much access to the same things. We made our houses out of the same materials. We ate the same kind of food. Then as civilization so-called evolved, there was more separation. We've gotten to a point now where there are enormous differences in how people live their lives. In our culture particularly, there's an emphasis on being different, on specializing. Whereas there wasn't

much to compare ourselves to in the old days—we were all pretty much the same—now there are endless iterations of how we can look, who we should be, what we should do in the world.

You just have to look at the world of specialist magazines, which I wasn't even aware of until I worked in publishing, and this evolved since I was in that field many years ago. I have a friend whose business is publishing specialized magazines, and there are magazines about knitting hats, or about big tractors, or twenty different types of magazines on different kinds of fishing—all of the ways we've gotten into these niches. From that, we look out at the world and feel different or special or superior or inferior. Within the realm of people living their lives, the Martha Stewarts of this world put out examples of what a Thanksgiving should look like. Has anyone ever had one of those Thanksgivings that Martha Stewart says is possible? I don't know of anyone. But all of these different ways we can compare ourselves—it used to be just our family or our friends or our village. Now we turn on the television and compare ourselves with someone in Italy or in Africa. The possibilities for proliferation around comparing are endless.

Put these two dynamics together and I began to understand why we have this insistent urge to compare, why there are so many ways this tendency manifests.

I have a Tibetan teacher, Tsoknyi Rinpoche, who is very wise and grew up in a culture where he was really loved as a child, with a sense of acceptance, living in a simpler culture where people had access to the same things. He's had to go through the same learning that many teachers from Asia have—trying to understand the Western mind, especially this tendency toward self-hatred. He's come to call it the disease of the West. He said, "In Tibet, we don't know this so much, but I really see what a challenge it is for people here." And he added, "This disease is proliferating. As I travel to the more westernized Asian countries like Taiwan or Singapore, I see it now in the youth there. They're also having this sense of not being good enough, this comparing."

So it's really something we've learned in a way—this distortion of it. The tendency or impulse is there, but somehow it's gotten distorted.

To investigate this further, I did a workshop with Byron Brown, who wrote the book *Soul Without Shame*. He's a student of A.H. Almaas, who founded the Ridhwan School, which offers a wonderful set of teachings and philosophies with real wisdom. In this workshop, Byron talked about the judge—how it came into being, what was the genesis of it. He explained that as children we had to learn social norms to get along, to develop a conscience. But as this process became internalized, it can become overactive and overcritical. This voice that originally is just the conscience becomes the judge, the

critic of everything we experience. We can come to see how, as adults, this voice is perhaps not so helpful for us. It actually limits us because the basic message of the judge becomes: I'm not good enough. And here's the kicker: people won't like me just as I am. It can follow that by kicking you when you're down: you'll never change, you haven't got what it takes to change.

He goes on to say in the book that the judge serves many functions. It is a conscience that helps you distinguish right from wrong. It is a motivator to push and persuade you to act in your life. It is a guard that stops inappropriate feelings and behavior. It is a counselor for support in making decisions. It is a guide that provides direction as you make your way. It is an authority figure offering recognition and approval.

It is a yardstick for measuring your progress. And last, it is a mirror that reflects back to you who you think you are.

Each person needs help in these ways. What you were not taught while growing up was how to discover the true source of these functions in yourself. Your true nature has the potential to meet all these needs, but only if the qualities necessary to do that are recognized as existing in you, fulfilling these roles.

When you were a young child, it was important that parents or responsible adults were there to fulfill these roles. As you grew up and became responsible for yourself, you had to find ways to meet these needs on your own. Unfortunately, you got little if any support in recognizing and developing your own inherent capacities. You had little choice but to internalize your parental role models in the form of the judge.

You may not be happy with the way it performs these important functions, but you are familiar with the judge and you know that it is dependable and will always be there for you. Lest we forget, the judge is not bad or evil or even useless. None of us would have survived into adulthood without a judge. Our society would not be as civilized as it is without the judge's constant presence. Each of us will need a judge until we find a source of effortless functioning, direct knowing, and objective conscience inside ourselves. In the meantime, the judge is all most people have to get the job done. However, it is also mechanical, restrictive, inefficient, and insensitive. It does a poor job of supporting the life of the spirit.

So it's really a call to begin this process of working skillfully with the judge, because we see how much it limits our capacity to open to the world and to the fullness of our experience.

In this workshop that I did with Byron Brown, one of the interesting things he had us do was ask the question: How does the judge serve us? What's right about judging? We had to ask it in the form of a repeating question, which many of you know and probably would run a mile if I said we were about to do one as a practice. But they can be quite helpful to uncover unconscious beliefs that we hold. So we had to spend ten minutes just answering that question: What's right about judging?

I actually found it really illuminating. And again, not to encourage you to do a lot of thinking about this, but if you find you're stuck in this pattern, just hold this question and see what comes up for you. What's right about judging? How does the judge serve us?

Often what happens is that it did serve us at some point in our lives, but we've really outgrown it. The habit is so strong, though, that we're still caught in it. But it can be all sorts of beliefs—like, well, at least we feel we know what's right. It can feel like a form of wisdom, and so we feel kind of justified in it. It can give us a sense of safety or control. It can make us feel that we can stay out of trouble if we listen to the judge, because it's so constricting and narrowing. We won't try anything new or experimental, all kinds of things like that.

When we judge others negatively, the same process applies. What's right about that? What do we get out of that? What I often say about the judging voice is that there's always some kind of hook in it that has some semblance of pleasure, some way it's fulfilling some need for us. Pleasure maybe is too strong a word, but some degree of satisfaction or rightness about this process. So when we judge others, we might feel superior, and that has a sense of gratifying the ego. Or perhaps we don't have to look at places where we feel inadequate—just push that aside. We can feel safe in that sense of separation. "Oh, I'm not like them. Look at them over there," and feel good about that.

An interesting one is when we judge others as better than ourselves. What do we get out of that? Why do we persist in doing that? There's usually something buried in there that's satisfying for us. When I look for myself and see myself doing that, I can see that in that sense of diminishing myself, there's a safety—I then don't have to go out into the world and reveal myself. Try something different. Experiment. Be a little bold or creative. I can stay in the safety of the rut that I've assigned myself. So it's just that fear.

And judging ourselves negatively, in the same way—what's beneficial? Why do we like to do that? And you'll all have different answers.

These are just some that I've seen in myself and in talking to others. It can reinforce the sense we have of ourselves as being unworthy. And even though what's being reinforced is a sense of unworthiness, the fact that it's agreeing with a view that we have is satisfying because it doesn't disrupt this view. We're holding on to the view. Perhaps it's reinforcing an internalized message that we've picked up from society or from our family about who we are.

I remember so vividly on one retreat I was teaching, there was a yogi who was perennially late for everything—late into the dhamma hall, late for talks, late for interviews, late for his yogi jobs. We'd hear about it from the cooks: what is it with this guy? We would talk to him about it, and he'd say, yes, yes, I know, it's a pattern, I'm really working with it. And he'd continue to be late. But he came in one day, and I could tell something had shifted.

He said he had just seen for himself the deep-rooted cause of this pattern of lateness. Throughout his life, he said, people were constantly angry with him for being late. His children were so fed up and frustrated with him. His relationships had even fallen apart over this. And he looked and he saw why he did it. He said what it does is that when people get angry with me, it reinforces the sense I have of being unworthy, and so I feel validated in that. This perpetuated his unconscious lateness everywhere because it validated the sense he had that he was unworthy. He would go, yep, you're right, I'm a terrible person, I'm always late. And as distorted as that was, it gave him some satisfaction of validation.

So it can operate on all these different levels. We're often not even aware of how these judgments, these views, are influencing us—how our worldview is so much a part of our inner landscape that we can't see it. We're just seeing the world through these views. We're lost in them, so identified. And what happens is we think they're observations, not judgments. It's just the way things are. This is what I'm like, or this is what those people are like. I'm just seeing things clearly for once. It is like this. The world is like this. We think because we think something, it must be true.

There's another New Yorker cartoon: a man talking to a woman saying, "Can't I ever be critical without being accused of criticizing?" There's a way in which we're thinking, I'm just saying it like it is. It's not being critical of you; it's just the way things are. And we can lose touch with the impact of our thoughts and our words and our deeds on ourselves and on others because it's just the way things are. This is the truth of things.

Sometimes we can feel lost if we don't have this sense of knowing really clearly what's right and what's wrong, who's in and who's out, what's good and what's bad. In that unsureness, we latch on to anything. We'd rather have a really painful judgment

than be in that place of not knowing. So we latch on to our views and opinions. We begin to see how that's more comfortable than perhaps feeling into a situation, opening to another's experience, trying to see what someone else might be experiencing.

It's important that we actually use our practice to work with this inner voice of the critic—not to see it as something we need to rush through or get rid of so we can then begin to meditate, then begin our spiritual practice. An important way our mindfulness can help us in this is that we can simply see judgments for what they are. They're just another thought in the mind. They're just another string of words. If we recognize them as that, just like any other thought we've recognized, we see in that recognition the impermanence of it, the transparency of it. We often have the experience of it just kind of disappearing. It doesn't have to have a ripple. It doesn't have to condition our worldview. It doesn't have to shift our view of ourselves. If we believe it, of course, it all tumbles out from that.

As we continue our practice, as we develop faith in our capacity to open, we have our experiences of connecting with the truth of things. We begin to value those experiences, this direct connection with reality, more and more. This becomes our reference point rather than the inner voice of negativity. And this wisdom, this connection, tells us that we are inherently whole and that there is a goodness there inside of us, a worthwhileness, a beauty.

We've all touched those places—that sense of appreciation or stillness or calm. That's what's there without the inner critic. If you've even just had a few moments of that judge being silenced for a while, it's such a huge difference to see that that's possible, that we can actually live without that inner voice of condemnation and cruelty and negativity. We need to learn to trust that experience more than all these conditioned views that we've picked up over our lifetime.

To trust that direct connection with the stillness, with the goodness, with the beauty that is there inside of all of us.

Again, Byron Brown says: "The only real alternative to self-judgment is knowing the truth about who you are. If you have a deep belief that you are worthless, you must discover where that belief came from and why you believe it to be true. Once you know deep inside you, with a direct and felt sense, that you have inherent value and are fully acceptable to yourself, then you will free yourself from the need for positive judgment and approval from others and from your own judge."

So we free ourselves from this negative sense of the judge and also free ourselves from always looking for and needing reinforcement from others—only valuing ourselves if we feel that others are valuing us—finding that sense of independence.

I've had many experiences of working with this judge in practice, but one that's particularly vivid to me revolves around this area. I was practicing on retreat here a number of years ago—actually a metta retreat—and I came on the retreat with some trepidation because I'd held metta at arm's length for many years, beginning by saying, "What a load of hogwash. Who wants to do that? Go around babbling about happiness and safety." It just seemed so pie in the sky and unrealistic and kind of hokey.

And when I looked a little closer at what was going on, I saw it was my fear that I couldn't actually move to that place that could love and accept myself, could actually express love to others. I realized that I really needed to challenge that view of myself and see what this practice could do, but I wasn't sure if I could.

So I began the practice, and in some ways it was going okay. My concentration was deepening and there weren't a lot of hindrances, but there wasn't a huge amount of metta. I had this idea of what it should look like—the ideal of golden light and an open heart and unconditional love—and it didn't look like that. It was just kind of warm and friendly, but that was about it.

I went in to see my teacher, who very kindly gave some mild adjustment to my practice. "Why don't you try this for a while?" But being who I was, and coming in with a sense of doubt about my own practice and ability, I took that one little line—and in between being in the interview room and by the time I got down to my walking path near the vegetable garden, I had blown it into a full-scale critique of everything I was trying to do and who I was in my practice.

"My teacher thinks it's hopeless. I am hopeless. Why did I ever think I could practice metta? This is the worst decision I've ever made. What can I do? Here I am, another month to go, and I've sublet my house, and I don't have a car." Just that—how can I get out of this horrendous situation of failure? Looking around, thinking everyone knows that I'm just so hopeless, and why did I ever think... I'm sure you know that experience. It was very familiar to me.

But as I walked down to my path—even probably just standing there—I really had the sense, this clear image, that I was on the edge of an abyss. The metaphor was so strong to me. And the grace or the insight that came, both out of my practice and probably from having done two weeks of metta, was that I had a choice. It was so clear that I could choose to just take that next step and go down into that well of poor me, failure,

hopeless, never change—all of those kinds of sentiments. I said to myself, it was very familiar. It would just take a little push and over I would go into that. I could dwell in there.

But what I thought was, yeah, you could stay there. What would it feel like? Hours? Days? I've got another four weeks. Could be four weeks of being in there.

Two thoughts came. One was that whenever I've been in that space, however difficult it was, somehow or another—through whatever grace or conditions changing or even just time—I came out of it. I found some balance, found some sense of equanimity, compassion, or forgiveness. And the other was: why not just avoid that whole scenario of gloom and doom and horrible, depressing, self-negating hatred and just step over the abyss? Just not go there.

I thought, what would it take to do that, to make that move and not go down there? And the obvious answer that came was: I'd have to accept my experience. This is what my practice looks like. This is who I am. If I could make it any different, I would have. But I can't. This is it.

And as little as that might seem, it wasn't like I then opened to all of that unconditional love that I'd been thinking I should have. But I was able to continue, realizing that if I needed it to be any different, I was going to suffer, because it wasn't different. It was what it was. I am who I am in that moment. It doesn't mean I couldn't change, but in that moment, that's all I could bring to my practice. And so I just continued, accepting my practice as it was.

And you know, I actually had an amazing retreat—not immediately, and in completely different ways than I had anticipated or expected in my idealized view of the practice. But just accepting who I was and what I was in that moment enabled me to step over that abyss and not go there.

Acceptance really is the heart of this practice of letting go of the judge, to really open to these feelings. And the practice can bring up a lot of old memories. All the bad things you've ever done will be paraded before you in your practice. If it hasn't happened yet, I'm sorry, it probably will at some point. And part of our practice is: can we just feel that very directly, very openly? Let it in. Bring it on, kind of thing. The first thing is just to feel it—all of the fear and anger and sadness and remorse that it might bring up.

Guilt and shame, not so helpful. But remorse can be really useful. Just acknowledging there were things that I did that were unskillful, to myself, to others. And really have that willingness to feel everything. Through that willingness, the acceptance comes in. And from the acceptance, forgiveness and compassion. We did the best that

we could. The causes and conditions of our life as it was in those days and those times—we were trying as best we could. We were confused, we were lost, we were hurt, we were frightened. Whatever might have been up, it's really important to just acknowledge that for ourselves and to bring in forgiveness and mettā, to bring in the kindness that acknowledges that.

The next part of working with the judging mind is the acceptance of others. We see, as we look at our inner experience and get a little clearer about what's going on, how much we build our worldview out of our sense of self. And it's often this diminished sense of self that I've been talking about—a little critical, a little fearful. Through that, we view the world and we view others. And that way of seeing limits our ability to really open to others in their fullness, with their difficulties, with their challenges.

We aren't able to fully understand another's experience, to really see that others may be having a very different reality than what we're experiencing. What we're experiencing—the way we're experiencing ourselves or this other person—isn't perhaps what they're experiencing. Just that, in and of itself, is a huge opening to reducing the amount of judging that we go through. We might not always have the correct perception. We might not have an understanding of why someone else is acting the way they are or responding the way they are. We can't know that other person's experience. So just a little bit of "don't know" in there can be so helpful.

One of my recent favorite movies is this New Zealand film called *Whale Rider*. I'm sure some of you saw it. If you haven't, I recommend it. It's about this young Māori girl who lives with her grandfather, who's a leader of their community. He's looking for his successor. His son isn't it, and his granddaughter he just doesn't even consider because she's a girl. She can't be a leader. Even though she exhibits all of these signs of being someone who's really quite special, he just says he has no use for her. It's so heartbreaking. And she's such an amazing young being in the movie.

It's not until some really amazing, life-changing event happens that he finally gets to see her for who she is and recognizes the leader that she is and can be—even though, you know, in his eyes, she's a girl.

All of us have this constricted view of other people. We see them through this lens of our projections. It's one of the reasons why the Dalai Lama has such an amazing effect on people. And if you ask him, "What is it you do that's so magical? Why do people love you so much?" he says, "I don't do anything special. I just look for what's common between us. I look for what unites us, not what separates us." He says to try to cultivate deep recognition of the equality of all beings, their potential to be free, their right not to suffer—rather than looking for what's different or what separates us.

When we get disconnected though, when we let this narrow view predominate, it brings about the judging. It can lead to this sense of separation, and it can feel very painful. And on retreat, again, through the sensitivity, we can really feel how painful it is when we push others away through that sense of separation.

Part of the practice is being willing to acknowledge how painful it is and not use it as a kind of armoring, because often we really do use the judge as a protection. It's actually the source of a lot of humor—humor that separates, that points to the other and makes fun of them. It's the judge manifesting again. You can see so much humor that does that.

Someone today, we were talking about the judge, and she told me a practice she uses which I thought was very helpful: "Lower your standards and relax." Great teaching. And she said, even if just a little bit, it lets me open to others just as they are. A really skillful thing to do.

What I saw when I looked at the judge is that a big part of this relationship to others is self-righteous indignation. Ever had a taste of that? Self-righteous indignation. It's such a fuel of the judging mind, of the separation that I'm talking about. And you just have to look at these three words: self-righteous indignation. I thought of it as the perfect storm of delusion.

Self—ego, me, I, mine. Righteous—views and opinions, fixed, permanent, "this is the way things are." Indignation—it's just a form of aversion. It's anger masquerading as indignation. We cloak it in self-righteousness to justify our anger. It's the opposite of what the Buddha taught: selflessness, impermanence, non-aversion, compassion. But we're stuck in it. For many of us, it's a refuge.

I found this writer, David Brin—he's a scientist, actually a science fiction writer—who feels that self-righteous indignation is actually a form of addiction, and it's a source of a huge amount of the divisiveness that we're seeing in the world today. This is what he says:

"We all know self-righteous people, and if we're honest, many of us will admit having wallowed in this state ourselves, either occasionally or in frequent rhythm. It is a familiar and rather normal human condition, supported, even promulgated, by messages in mass media. While there are many drawbacks, self-righteousness can be heady, seductive, and even, well, addictive. Any truly honest person will admit that the state feels good. The pleasure of knowing, with subjective certainty, that you are right and your opponents are deeply, despicably wrong. Sanctimony, or a sense of righteous out-

rage, can feel so intense and delicious that many people actively seek to return to it again and again. Moreover, researchers have found that this tendency crosses all boundaries of ideologies."

He describes how it's just rife throughout our debates today, the dialogues that we have—this addiction to self-righteous indignation and that sense of strength that comes from it. Just to feel how crazy this is and how separating. What's needed is to deflate all aspects of that triumvirate of delusion that we get lost in.

So we work with the judge by knowing it, by seeing it as thoughts in the mind, seeing it just as it is, feeling the emotions that it brings up—whether it's fear or aversion or indignation, shame or grief, anger—letting ourselves know what's happening.

It's really important to bring humor into this practice. It can feel so painful. We can feel so tight and contracted around the judging mind that to bring some levity in, some acceptance and compassion, is really helpful.

Jack Kornfield recommends—and many of us do—counting your judgments. By the time you get to five hundred, you'll see just how knee-jerk they are, and you have to let go a little bit. You can use little taglines. You notice you're judging, and you can sometimes tell whose voice it is. And you might just say, "Thanks, Auntie Hattie, thanks for your opinion, but I don't need that right now. I'm changing the channel." Whatever works for you.

For me, my tagline came from a practice here on retreat, where I was just so dismayed by the relentlessness of the judge. I tried all these different things. I felt it in the body. I counted them. I knew when they came up. And nothing really stopped them. So I made this vow. My practice was that every time I noticed a judging thought, I would add, "and chipmunks are cute."

And it just shifted the energy, because every time I had a judging thought, I would think of chipmunks. And who cannot like chipmunks? They're just that energy. It's amazing to see how, when I would do that, in shifting the energy, the judging thought was just gone.

So find what works for you. It's going to be different at different times. For me, it was also really helpful to see how I was creating this form of suffering. We were speaking this morning about intention and volition. We do this volitionally. Sure, it arises out of causes and conditions, and it can seem to happen quite spontaneously—that's part of the impersonal nature of it. But as we tune in, unless we begin to work with the causes and conditions, it will keep happening. Once we bring mindfulness to it, we can see that

there is a choice we can make about continuing to feed that judge, feed that sense of separation, or incline the mind towards acceptance, peace, or calm—whatever works for you.

Another helpful skillful means is to actually do some metta. If you notice you're judging yourself or others, follow it with a line of metta. May I be happy. May you be happy. May you be safe from judging, free of judging. May I be free of judging. And it can feel insincere at times, when you say it and the energy of the judge is still there. But as my wise friend and elder Carol Wilson says, "Fake metta is better than real aversion."

So just try it. Anything is better than perpetuating the judge. And especially as we begin to see our practice in terms of an unfolding path leading to greater and greater happiness, greater and greater freedom, greater and greater wisdom and compassion—they just don't go together. If this is really our deepest and sincerest wish for ourselves, how can we willingly give energy to this judging mind, this negative, painful pattern, this source of suffering? To really look at it this way, to hold these two possibilities and ask: Which would I choose? Which do I choose for myself? Let that begin to diminish the tendency of moving in that direction.

These thoughts are impermanent. They come and go. We bring the wisdom in, and we practice acceptance. We learn that acceptance is a way we're kind to ourselves, that we actually come more and more into alignment with the truth of things. And this is so simple yet so profound. If we make these choices toward more and more happiness, letting go, freedom, the contrast becomes clearer. The choices become clearer. And this is how we do our practice, and it's how we live our lives.

I want to close with a quote from Marianne Williamson, which is a little flowery, but I think it really speaks to this. She says:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Who are you not to be? Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that others won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us, it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

Let's just sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 31

What Versus Why

Andrea Fella · 53 min

In this profound dharma talk, Andrea Fella examines the crucial distinction between intellectual understanding of our experience through asking 'why' and the liberating practice of directly observing 'what' is happening in the present moment. Drawing from the Sabbāsava Sutta (MN 2), she explains the Buddha's teaching on wise attention (yoniso manasikāra), noting how the Four Noble Truths serve as a framework for investigating present-moment experience rather than merely philosophical reflection.

Through vivid personal examples—from embarrassing stage moments to panic attacks to deep patterns of self-hatred—Fella illustrates how suffering and its causes arise in the present moment, not in our historical narratives about why things happened. She demonstrates how the mind habitually scans history to assign meaning to bodily sensations, sometimes incorrectly, and how simply witnessing the chain of cause and effect (paṭicca samuppāda) as it unfolds can decondition our deepest habitual tendencies.

The talk offers practical guidance for working with difficult mind states, including the 'double note' technique of observing contact and feeling tone when stuck in challenging patterns. Fella emphasizes that this precise attention to impermanence, unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), and not-self (anattā) can cut through conditioning that years of intellectual analysis cannot touch, opening the path to freedom from suffering.

As human beings, we seem to be very curious about why things happen. Many good things have come from this tendency. Civilization itself really owes its origin to this quest for why—science, technology.

We also seem to be particularly curious about why things happen to *me*. And we have a lot of experience, especially in this culture, I think, of exploring, intellectualizing, thinking about why things are happening to us.

Looking at our experience, looking at our life through this framework of why things are happening can yield some intellectual understanding about our experience, about the causes and conditions leading to our experience. And this can be helpful. Sometimes, if we're reactive—for example, if somebody says something that we feel is hurtful to us—we may know this person and know that it wasn't intentional. Having that understanding can mitigate our response, at least our outward response to the situation.

But sometimes we mistakenly think that this intellectual understanding will actually change our response, change our feelings about the situation—that we can, through intellect, through reason, tell ourselves not to feel a certain way because we see that it doesn't make sense. But actually, often this kind of intellectual understanding doesn't really cut through to the deeper aspects, the roots of our experience, what we might call —what I think the Buddha calls—the underlying tendencies of our experience. The latent tendencies.

It can help to tap into a different way of being, a different way of understanding our experience than through the thought process, through thinking back, understanding why things are happening. We have so much experience with thinking, with the understanding of why, with intellectualizing. We're very practiced at that. And we are much less practiced at an exploration, an understanding through *what* is happening as opposed to *why*.

The Buddha taught wise attention as a way to understand our experience. I'll read you a little bit from one of the suttas about wise attention. First he discusses attending unwisely:

"An untaught ordinary person does not understand what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. Since that is so, he attends to those things unfit for attention and does not attend to those things fit for attention. This is how she attends unwisely: Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what did I become in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I become in the future? Or else she is inwardly perplexed about the present thus: Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go?"

All of those questions—we could look at them as forms of "why is this happening to me?"

The Buddha goes on to talk about wise attention: "A well-taught noble disciple understands what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. Since that is so, he does not attend to those things unfit for attention, and he attends to those things fit for attention. She attends wisely: This is suffering. She attends wisely: This is the origin of suffering. She attends wisely: This is the cessation of suffering. She attends wisely: This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering."

When I first read this—this is one of my favorite suttas—I didn't really understand so much what this wise attention through the Four Noble Truths meant. I thought it was just a reflection on the Four Noble Truths. But then, looking at it a little more closely, I saw what he said is: *This* is suffering.

This is the cause of suffering. *This*—what I am experiencing right now—is suffering. What I'm experiencing right now is the cause of suffering.

I think the sutta is saying that we can use the Four Noble Truths as a framework for exploring our present moment experience. Suffering occurs in the present moment. It doesn't occur in the past or the future. If we are suffering over something that happened in the past, what's going on is there are thoughts arising right now, in the present moment, that are creating the suffering right now, in the present moment.

Some years ago, I was an actress in a play. One night during the performance, I forgot my line. I tried ad-libbing, saying other things so that the other actors would realize, "She's forgotten her line, I need to jump in and help." After a few attempts, I realized they weren't picking up the cue. I ran out of things to say, and there was this gaping silence. The wall between the audience and the actors broke down. I looked out and saw everybody staring at me, waiting for me to speak. It was a very embarrassing moment.

For many years afterward, when something triggered that memory, I would feel the embarrassment all over again. On one three-month retreat, I remembered that moment many, many times. I got to really see what was happening. The thought would appear—I was on the stage looking out—and the feeling of embarrassment would come over me. I began to recognize that the suffering, the embarrassment happening there in my room, was happening right now. The conditions for it had occurred in the past: I had been on that stage, I had forgotten my lines, the embarrassment had happened then. But the suffering I was experiencing on the three-month retreat was happening right now. It was being constructed all over again, right in the present moment.

So not only does suffering occur in the present moment, but as the Buddha teaches, this is the cause of suffering—the cause also occurs in the present moment. The *why* occurs in the present moment. Why we are suffering, the direct cause of why we are suffering, happens in the present moment. When we can see this direct cause, the direct why in the present moment, our suffering can start to fall apart. We see it as just conditioned phenomena arising and passing. As Carol said this morning, "Empty phenomena rolling on"—which Munindraji said many times.

Another example: in the early years of my practice, one of my main practices was observing my emotions in daily life. At one point, after a breakup of a long relationship, I was observing a lot of loneliness. In particular, I noticed that when I went to bed at night, I was lonely. This didn't particularly surprise me. I figured I understood why I was lonely going to bed at night. But I was in the practice of observing my emotions, so I just started noticing this loneliness as I went to bed. I would just notice it.

One night, as I was getting ready for bed, I noticed that the loneliness began when I set my alarm clock. I thought this was kind of odd. But I just kept going, kept getting ready for bed. For the next several nights, I observed this same pattern: as I set my alarm clock, the loneliness appeared.

One night, as I was setting my little digital alarm clock, I noticed a thought pass through my mind. I was with my ex-boyfriend in Disneyland, looking up at a marquee in Tomorrowland where there was a digital clock. I could see the connection between what I was doing and the memory—an associative link between the digital clock and the memory. I could also see that the cause of the loneliness was a reactivity to that memory: "Oh, poor me, all of those good times are over." It didn't actually have anything to do with, "Now I'm single, now I'm going to bed by myself," which is what I had assumed the loneliness was about. The actual cause of the loneliness in that moment was the reactivity to a memory triggered by a physical experience—seeing the clock.

The loneliness was there anyway that evening, but I was amazed at the way the mind could see how things were triggered, how things were caused. What amazed me even more was the next night when I went to bed—

I was setting the alarm clock, and of course the memory came back. The thinking about my ex-boyfriend came back. But what really surprised me is that the loneliness did not come back. And in fact, that regular every-night-going-to-bed-lonely stopped. It was as if the seeing of the link—the loneliness being a reaction to a thought—somehow decoupled the reactivity to that memory.

So the cause of my loneliness... I had thought that the cause was the whole history of the relationship and the breakup, but it was really just a reaction to a thought. That's all. That was the cause of that loneliness. Witnessing in the present moment what is happening, seeing that directly, can have a powerful impact on the deeper roots of our conditioning.

There's a distinction between the why of history—the "why me, why is this happening to me"—and seeing the why of the present moment. As I hope this example about the clock shows, the why of history had to do with a lot of "oh poor me, I'm single, I'm

never going to be happy again, I'm never going to have a relationship again." But the why of the moment was seen in the experiencing of the moment. It was a thought, a reaction to a thought, the arising of an emotion—just this empty phenomenon rolling on.

So how do we look at what is actually happening? We've been talking a lot about this in the instructions. This is investigation—investigating our experience, investigating the present-moment phenomenon of our experience. What is happening right now? Emotions, bodily sensations. Often we want to understand why these are happening. But again, looking at what is happening in the present moment reveals a lot of information that we're not as often attuned to.

We have this wonderful opportunity on retreat to really attune ourselves to what is happening in our experience. Looking at the bodily sensations, looking at the emotional responses, noticing what thoughts are triggered, when things happen, when they arise, when they pass away. Paying attention to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral—a wonderful place to explore what is happening in the moment and to see how reactivity is born out of leaping off of pleasant or unpleasant.

One student came to one of my introductory classes a couple of years ago. It was the very first or second night he had come, and he told me that he was having panic attacks—a lot of overwhelming feelings of panic at just random times, not particularly traceable as far as he could tell to any reason. He was diagnosed with agoraphobia and severe panic attacks. Someone in his support group had suggested he go to an introductory meditation class, so he appeared at my intro class.

He told me about his experience. He was a scientist, trained in this exploration of cause and effect and asking why. Why are things happening? He could see that the panic attacks didn't really have any kind of rational root. So he would talk to himself and say, "Why is this happening? There's no need for this to be happening." He would try to use his intellect to help him ride out his panic attacks.

After listening to his story, I suggested, "I'd like to give you another question to explore. Rather than asking why or looking at the experience from the why side, see if you can just notice what is happening. Ask, 'What is happening right now?'"

He was quite remarkably able to do this quite quickly. He said that he noticed the tension in his neck, the tightness, the constriction of the breathing. Just staying with the sensations, the panic did not build. And after a very short time—a matter of a couple of months—the panic attacks lessened dramatically. He told me about a year ago that he hadn't had panic attacks in quite a while and has been free of them since then, through exploring what is happening as opposed to focusing on why.

When we look at the present-moment experience, this "what" of our experience, often the cause—the why of the present moment—reveals itself, as it did for me in the example of the alarm clock. Sometimes there can be many, many layers of present-moment causes underlying a particular experience.

On one long retreat at Spirit Rock, I was experiencing a lot of doubt in myself, doubt about doing long-term practice. "Why am I here? Why should I be doing this?" I was doing walking meditation, and this was plaguing me. The thoughts were just overwhelming me.

Why? Why? Why am I here? Why?

And I decided to see if I could just notice what was happening. It was primarily coming about through thinking. This overwhelming doubt attack was coming about through thinking.

So I would set myself in the walking to just do the walking meditation, focusing on my feet. But as soon as I saw a thought, I would stop and just notice what was happening in that moment—what the thought is, what the emotional response is.

I did this for some period of time, maybe twenty minutes, and I saw a number of different layers through this process of exploring the *what*. I started out with just this feeling of doubt, and then I noticed a fear of not measuring up somehow, of not being a good enough yogi. And underneath that—each time I would notice one of these thoughts, I would just note it, stop, feel the fear, and then go back to walking. Settle the thoughts and go back to walking. Then as soon as the next thought would arise, I would stop again. Often I wouldn't get more than one or two steps before the next thought would hit me.

After the fear, underneath the fear, was this feeling of unworthiness—that I wasn't worthy to be dedicating my life to this practice, having given up my job to devote my life to this practice. Under that was an insecurity about my financial situation. Under that was an aversion to that insecurity. And then there was a vulnerability. Just this feeling of vulnerability.

When I hit that feeling of vulnerability, it was like, *wow, this is truth*. And I could stay with that feeling. Just rest in that space.

This was a way to explore the layers of our experience through just looking at what is happening. What is happening right now?

Sometimes in this kind of exploration, the why of history is revealed. It's shown to us. A thought will appear that clearly connects a historical incident with the present moment experience. And that can be interesting, but it's actually not necessary. It's not necessary to uncover the historical reasons. What's necessary is to see what is happening right now—how the causes and conditions are coming together in the moment to create our experience.

Actually, if we look for a why, if we think about or try to find a why of our experience, it can lead us to conclusions that may or may not be true.

There's a strong interconnection between mind and body, particularly where emotions are concerned. Emotional changes often produce strong changes in sensation in the body. And strong sensations in the body can trigger or produce an emotional reaction. It goes both ways.

As an aside, just as an interesting confirmation of this, there's a study done by Paul Ekman and Richard Davidson. Paul Ekman is a great student of emotions, and Richard Davidson has done a lot of research on the neurological basis of experience. This is what they said about the connection between body and mind:

In the course of our research, we found something that surprised us. If you intentionally make a facial expression, you change your physiology. By making the correct expression, you begin to have changes in your physiology that accompany the emotion. This was seen in both work on bodily physiology and some work with Richard Davidson on changes in the brain. The face is not simply a means of display, but also a means of activating emotion.

In other words, simply putting the face into a smile drives the brain into patterns typical of happiness, just as a frown does with sadness.

So bodily experience can produce emotional responses. I've often noticed when certain physical experiences come into the body, the mind starts trying to figure out what is happening and why they're happening. There's an inclination or a tendency to understand the meaning.

I've discovered in my own practice the tendency to assign an emotion to physical experience. Our minds scan our history to figure out, to assign, based on this bodily experience, what emotion we're having. And this habit of scanning, I found, sometimes assigns the wrong emotion.

I had one experience with this on another three-month retreat. I was waiting for an interview with Joseph, and as usual, I was—I thought at least—feeling anxiety.

The body was quivering. That seemed to be proof enough, and also I was in a context where I had been anxious in the past. You know, that kind of inner dialogue: "It's been three days, I haven't talked to anybody, what am I going to say? Is it going to look good?" All of those things that go through the mind. But mostly I was experiencing this quivering in the body.

So I was noticing this quivering, and I was noting "anxiety." I was using the note "anxiety." And the interview ahead of me went on for a long time, so I got to observe this for quite a while. I noticed, oddly I thought, that the anxiety didn't change much. That seemed strange to me because usually when I'm actually noticing what's happening in the moment and observing it with mindfulness, there's some shift around it. A little space opens up. But that hadn't happened in this case, and that made me curious.

So I started just opening up to what was actually happening in the experience. There's quivering in the body. And I very rapidly discovered that what was actually happening was rapture, not anxiety. After that, the sensations got very strong. The quivering became much more rapture-like.

So the body can produce sensations, and based on habit, we can scan and assign an emotion. We're in that mode of looking for meaning, assigning significance, asking "why is this happening?" It's helpful to just notice what is happening.

Sometimes also, I've found, a certain constellation of physical experience can be a habit in and of itself. It's like we're so habitually attuned to a particular state that the physical experience becomes habitual, whether or not an emotion is actually there. For instance, a feeling of contraction and heaviness around the heart might be sadness. Maybe, maybe not. It might just be a habitual pattern of the body without the sadness necessarily being present.

So be willing to explore what our experience is without rapidly assigning a meaning or a "why" to what is happening.

There's a beautiful poem that speaks to this, by Fernando Pessoa:

The mystery of things, where is it?
Why doesn't it come out to show us at least that it's mystery?
What do the river and the tree know about it?
And what do I, who am no more than they, know about it?
Whenever I look at things and think about what people think of them,
I laugh like a brook cleanly plashing against a rock.
For the only hidden meaning of things is that they have no hidden meaning.
It's the strangest thing of all, stranger than all poets' dreams

and all philosophers' thoughts,
that things are really what they seem to be, and there's nothing to understand.
Yes, this is what my senses learned on their own.
Things have no meaning. They exist.
Things are the only hidden meaning of things.

We can also get seduced by looking for meaning around meditative experiences, not just emotional ones. Something happens in our practice—suddenly the mindfulness seems elusive. Why is that? What did I do wrong? We feel like we're a bad meditator, or maybe a good meditator, depending on what we're experiencing. Somehow it means something about us.

The way through any experience is simply to notice what is actually happening.

I had an experience with this at my first three-month course, where for a period of time the mind got very settled. It was pretty easy to be with the breath; the mind wasn't wandering much. Then I started noticing one day that suddenly the mind was wandering all the time. What happened? Why is this? What's gone wrong? But I'd had enough experience by that point to recognize: well, this is what's happening.

Just notice what is happening. And paying close attention to my experience, what I saw was that when I first sat down, the mind connected very easily with the breath, and very rapidly the breath got very, very subtle, very quiet. So quiet, in fact, that it almost disappeared. And it was when the breath got that quiet that the mind would wander.

I began to see that the mind had settled to a point where the subtlety of experience was stronger or deeper—the subtlety was more subtle than the mindfulness actually knew how to connect with. So I just would stay with it as long as I could, as long as I could stay with the breath. Then I'd notice the mind wandered, and I'd come back and just notice again. And over time, the mindfulness caught up with the subtlety of the experience.

So it wasn't necessarily a problem that the mind had started wandering. It was an indication of something shifting in the practice. Just looking at what is happening, no matter what is happening—that is the instruction. What is happening right now?

I'd like to talk a little more about the cause and effect that becomes apparent as we look at what is happening in the moment—the why of the present moment getting revealed to us. As we see what is happening, it's almost automatic that we start to see the cause and effect nature of our experience. An image arises, a reaction to the image, an

emotion following the reaction, another emotion following that emotion—and there is a chain. There's a clear link between them. The arising of one experience leads to the arising of the next experience.

As we start to see this cause and effect relationship, we see that it's really just impersonal experience, impersonal phenomenon. No "I" doing anything, no "me" actually creating the reaction, but just an experience followed by another experience.

This chain of cause and effect in the present moment is not deterministic. In the present moment, we also have the opportunity—choice can arise in the present moment. Choice of how to be with our present moment experience. And one of the most powerful choices we can make is to simply observe the chain of events that are unfolding, to simply witness what is arising with mindfulness. This witnessing can start to have a deep impact on these underlying latent tendencies, on the stream of unfolding experience.

I have another example that I'd like to go through with you, one that ties together many of these different things I've been talking about this evening—the different kinds of whys of experience, the why of history, the why of the present moment. It was one of my deepest habits, one of my deepest ruts in my mind.

I'm sure most of you have this sense of some pattern that's so deep, so deeply conditioned, that it's like a rut in the mind with a magnetic pull to it. If we get anywhere near this rut, the little ball drops in there and just rolls around. That rut is so deep it seems impossible to get the ball out.

For me, one of the deep ruts in my mind was self-hatred. Through years of therapy, I had seen or understood to some extent that this pattern of self-hatred was connected with a particular relationship in my life. So I understood that, although I hadn't seen any direct evidence of it. It just made sense—kind of like it made sense to me that when I was going to bed at night alone, I would be lonely. There was a recognition: yes, that makes sense, this is why this pattern is there. But the years of therapy hadn't really touched the pattern or the habit, that rut.

On one three-month retreat, something happened. I had noticed this feeling of self-hatred arise on many, many retreats. But on this particular retreat, it was very prevalent. And I began to see the more direct connection, the more direct link between that relationship and the present moment experience of the self-hatred.

As I described a little while ago, sometimes as we're observing our present moment experience, we can see an image or a thought from history that makes a clear link to our experience. I could see that this relationship was central. I actually experienced the centrality of that relationship to the self-hatred.

And I felt a huge opening around that. A lot of compassion came up for this person and for the suffering they experienced—suffering that made them treat me in such a way that I would end up with such low self-esteem. There was a huge release around that. And I actually thought that it would have some effect or impact on that rut in my mind.

But the rut was just as deep. It actually surprised me. The next time the self-hatred came up, it was just as strong. Because I felt like, wow, I had this real huge release around this—shouldn't this have done something?

What it did do—I would call that a psychological insight, that recognition of the connection in our present moment experience to a historical event. What it did do for me was allow me to be a little less threatened by the experience of self-hatred. I could see that it was a pattern of conditioning, so it was less threatening. There was less resistance to the self-hatred because of that psychological insight. That was a benefit.

But I still got to experience that self-hatred over and over and over again during that retreat. I would see it come, I would be in it, and sometimes it would be so painful that I couldn't do much with it but just feel the self-hatred. But I would see that it came and went. There were times when it just wasn't there at all, and then I would experience it coming back. Just watching it come and go, seeing that it was impermanent.

Then one day, one evening in the hall, Joseph was doing a question and answer session, and he talked about a technique for when we get really stuck in something. The technique when we're really, really stuck, when the experience we're having is so sticky and hard to see through—he talked about using a double note. The double note is contact and then feeling tone. So for me, in this experience, the self-hatred was unpleasant, and "contact, unpleasant" would be what I would note.

I just heard this instruction that evening. As I left the Dharma Hall, I wasn't particularly in that mode of self-hatred, but as I walked up the stairs, I felt it descend. And I felt powerless. It was so strong, and again, that rut was so deep—it's like there's almost no way to pull yourself out. But having just heard this instruction, I went back to my room and started seeing if I could notice the moment I felt any additional movement towards that self-hatred. Just contact, unpleasant. Contact, unpleasant. I tried to have that note come right at the moment when I felt that movement of "you're no good."

I usually used a little alarm to tell myself when a sitting was ending. My beeper went off at some point, but I was right in there, just noticing the movement towards this self-hatred. I realized, this isn't the time to get up. I'm just going to keep looking at this.

Maybe about ten minutes later, noticing contact, unpleasant, seeing "this is just a thought"—the ephemeral nature of that thought was shown by looking at it just so precisely. Contact, unpleasant. The next moment, there was this moment of seeing the ephemeral nature of that thought: this is just a thought. The next moment, a split second later, the body was flooded with bliss. The next moment, the mind recognized: ah, this too is impermanent. There was a recognition that even though I had seen this, it didn't necessarily mean the self-hatred was gone. That was kind of the feeling of the bliss —"oh, never again, I've figured this out." But the next moment was just: this too is impermanent.

That recognition, that seeing into the ephemeral nature, the anattā nature of that thought, cut really deeply into that habit of self-hatred. It was like the rut went from this deep to that shallow in the space of an instant. I didn't trust it for years, actually. It was a long time before I felt self-hatred again.

But what I began seeing after a while was just this: the thoughts are still there. "You're no good." But the belief is what's been undermined. There are still tendrils of the pattern hanging out, and I think we need to watch for those tendrils. They can take root again.

So looking at what is happening, no matter what is happening—we often need courage to stay with present moment experience. It can be really frightening. It can feel very counterintuitive to stay with something that feels so threatening, like self-hatred. But we can witness suffering and its cause in the present moment.

Looking at what is happening in the moment can decondition our deep habitual tendencies, our deep patterns, the deep patterns in our mind. And it can open us, no matter what we're paying attention to. It doesn't matter what we're paying attention to. We can be paying attention to self-hatred. We can be paying attention to the most sublime states of bliss. What's important is noticing what is happening to them—what it is and what happens to it as you observe it.

This leads us to the discovery of impermanence, of unsatisfactoriness, of not-self. This is the path to freedom from suffering.

Let's sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 32

Leaving Your Comfort Zone

Sharda Rogell · 55 min

> *In this profound talk, Sharda Rogell addresses a common question that arises in intensive retreat practice: how to freshen an experience that feels repetitive and stale. She reveals that when we ask for freshness, we are actually inviting ourselves to let go of everything familiar and move into the unknown—something most people instinctively avoid. This letting go is an act of renunciation (nekkhamma) that lies at the heart of the Buddha's path.*
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> *Rogell explores our habitual tendency to search externally for peace, constantly manipulating conditions to find rest. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that "agitation comes about because we try to find a permanent refuge in things that are always changing," she illuminates how this searching creates the very dukkha we seek to escape. Through personal stories—including a challenging vision quest in England and a solitary retreat in New Zealand—she demonstrates that equanimity is not about transcending difficult conditions but about accepting them fully, which then opens access to wisdom and compassion.*
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> *The talk emphasizes that acceptance is not the endpoint but the doorway to deeper understanding. Rogell acknowledges the vulnerability inherent in letting go and encourages practitioners to honor their limitations with care and respect. She reminds us that everything needed for awakening is revealed in this present moment, and invites us to bow down to each experience—pleasant or painful—as part of the path to freedom.*

So this morning, for those of you who were at the morning sit, this gentleman over here had the question about wanting to freshen his experience. He talked about how he noticed there was a reflection on how his experience was so familiar. And he said, you know, like the same thoughts, the same pain, the same stewed prunes. And it's like noticing that kind of repetition of experience and how to have that quality of freshening, brightening.

I think it's a really important question for us, this question about refreshing. Later, a yogi came in and said, yeah, it's like Groundhog Day. Many of you have probably seen that movie. And retreat can be very much like that kind of experience of Groundhog Day, where it's just the same thing again and again and again. And this sense of, how do you get out of this? How can this experience feel more fresh, more bright?

So I was reflecting on this when I was putting my talk together this afternoon, and I was sensing that it's really a very beautiful intention to want to freshen the mind. But I really wonder if when we ask for that, when we ask for this freshening, do we really know what we're asking for? Do we really know what we're inviting?

Because what we're really saying is that in order to move away from the familiar into that which is fresh, we have to let go of what we know. We have to let go of the familiar and the known and move into the unfamiliar and the unknown. And most people do everything they possibly can to avoid that. They don't want to move into the unknown. They want to keep their situation, their circumstances familiar and comfortable and secure. This is really the whole movement of people's lives—to keep this construction very safe and secure. In a way, it's the whole position of the ego, of the small self, to hold itself together in quite a configured way so that things don't change so much, so that we stay in the familiar.

For me, I've had much more appreciation for what we're really doing in this practice. At Spirit Rock in California, I often teach beginning classes—we call them Vipassana 101 classes. I just taught one last month, and you get a group of people who really haven't sat or really looked at their mind very much. I started this class at Spirit Rock with about forty people. And when I begin, I really know what I'm beginning to ask these people to do, which is to let go—to let go of everything that is familiar, everything that you know, that you take to be true.

And it's always interesting to me that I start off with a rather large class, and by the end, there's less than half the people in the class. I think I ended with about twenty people over six weeks. Either I'm not a very good teacher and people are put off by me, but I don't think that's actually what it is. It's that once people start to actually get a sense of what's being asked of them, it's not just, "Oh, let's go into a very open and tranquil and lovely meditative space together where we're all just going to hang out." When they realize that's not what's actually being taught, it's like, "Okay, I think I'll do this maybe next year, or when I feel a little bit more ready in myself."

This practice really requires that we leave our comfort zone, because this trying to keep things familiar and secure and safe to a certain degree keeps our comfort. And we have to let go of our comfort in order to do this practice.

Coming here to a retreat such as this is really a way that you are leaving your comfort zone. You wouldn't be able to come here, you wouldn't be able to do the kind of practice you're doing if you weren't willing to leave your comfort zone. And what you might find is that the conditions here are so beautiful and secure, and there's such a sense of safety, that there may be a way that you start to feel comfortable again. You

find your spots in the hall and your walking paths and the times that you're going to get your food. And again, you can create your little territory and sense of safety and comfort. And that's okay. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that. It's okay that we do that because the conditions here really are very supportive for this investigation and this letting go. These conditions here really are in support of this renunciation that I'm speaking about.

It's an act of renunciation. There's already so much that you've let go of to come here, to be here. So much of the usual distractions and stimulations and engagements—your family and loved ones and work and the worldly pleasures and offerings that we engage with. There's so much that you've let go of already. So it is an act of renunciation to be here, leaving your comfort zone.

But it's challenging. It's challenging because you're right up against that edge in a way, knowing that you're being asked to let go—or you're even inviting yourself to let go—of the known, of the familiar. We are generally, as human beings, culturally, so addicted to stimulation, to engaging in activities that keep us occupied in some way.

We go from one thing to the next thing to the next thing. And particularly in this day and age, with all the multitasking and so much happening and all the speed and all the activities, we can keep pretty engaged and pretty active if we like to be. So we have let go of quite a lot.

But we can see even here how there's a kind of addiction to control—an addiction to wanting to have our external experiences, our external situation, and our internal experiences be a particular way. That's a lot of what we examine: this way that the ego self, this conditioned self, wants to manipulate experience to meet our needs, our expectations, our desires, our wants. And the mind, how the mind's moving for and against so that we can generate conditions that are suitable for us, that we like, that we feel comfortable in, that we say, "Yeah, this is good, this is what I want."

We're so conditioned to move out through our senses towards pleasure. We're conditioned to move out through our mind towards pleasure—fantasies, memories, planning, future ideas—how the mind leans, how the senses lean out. And we can see how we might want to manipulate and create the conditions here for that. This is so habitual for us, this kind of searching mind. We're searching for those conditions that are going to do it for us. Fixing this and checking this and making little adjustments here and refinements there so that perhaps we can find a place to rest.

For me, a good metaphor is this: sometimes I find myself at home—I happen to pay for cable TV, and there's about a hundred channels with the remote control. Sometimes when I don't have too much to do, I'll sit there and surf through the channels, searching, searching, searching for somewhere that I can just rest and be interested in something that's happening on TV. But what usually happens is I'm searching and searching and there's nothing worth watching, nothing that's interesting. But then I'll just keep going a little bit longer. It's so unsatisfying, even these hundred channels.

You might be laughing because it might be similar to your own mind—the hundred channels in your own mind, searching for this place where you can say, "Ah, okay, now I can rest here." Fortunately, I watch what I'm doing so I don't indulge in it too long, otherwise I could really get quite compulsive with it. It could be very unpleasant.

One time I did the most intensive retreat for myself. I set up a three-week solitary retreat in New Zealand at this center that I love a lot called Temawata, in the north part of the North Island. The place where I had a little cabin was in the woods, down in a valley—you had to walk up to get there, and it wasn't on top of a hill. I would much prefer being on top of a hill where I have a lot of sky and space. But this was kind of down, a little bit dark, in the bush. And I was completely alone, solitary for three weeks there. Somebody would come every three or four days and bring a little package of food and put it outside my door. I didn't see anybody or talk to anybody.

It was much harder than I thought it was going to be. I think I was a little naive in thinking that I could actually be that solitary. It was very hard for me to keep my mind uplifted, to stay in a place of some happiness or some ease. Very difficult to be in those conditions of so much isolation and solitude.

And there was this one bird, this one bird that had the most beautiful bird song. When it would sing, the song would echo through the whole valley. It would sing maybe three or four times in the day. I think it was a tui bird. This tui bird has this beautiful, exquisite song with many different ranges to its voice.

I would wait for that song. I noticed how my mind would just lean, waiting for that beautiful song. And when the song actually came, my heart would raise up. I'd feel so uplifted. It would go on for probably ten seconds, fifteen seconds—long enough to make contact and rest in it. And I would just be so happy, just uplifted and happy.

And then it would go away. And then I noticed I would just kind of fall down again. And then I'd wait. Wait for the song.

It was almost as if that was the only thing I could depend on that would help me feel some upliftment in myself. And yet I was dependent. I was attached to that song because I couldn't find the resources in myself at that time. I just couldn't find a place for my mind to rest. So I would look, I would search for where my mind could rest, even for five seconds or ten seconds.

Ah, that peace, that *ahh* feeling.

So it's like this question: What are we searching for? What are we searching for when we move out in that way through the senses, through our fantasies, our mind, all those plans and images? What are we searching for?

I think it is this rest, this kind of peace where we can just put it all down. And sometimes we have those kinds of experiences where it's like, *yes*, this is what I've been waiting for. And it feels so wonderful. The mind and the body, the heart, can just settle and rest. And it's wonderful.

And yet it often passes. It usually passes. It doesn't last. It's not stable. And so then we search and we're searching again. We want that.

It seems that there's some kind of inner knowing that it is possible for us to find this place of rest—or even if it's not a place, some way that our mind can rest and we can know deeply this sense of peace. It's like there's something inherent in our being that knows that possibility. So we keep searching. We keep longing for that.

But it's almost as if we don't know where to look. We get confused. So we just keep reaching out, keep going out. Where is it? Like I did with the bird. And it can be quite sorrowful sometimes, quite disappointing, that this seems so elusive to us, this sense of peace, this sense of rest. It's very sad, very painful in some ways, that there's this intuitive sense that inherently this is possible, but we don't know where to go. We don't know where to find it.

I was talking to my mother the other day, and she was doing her usual thing of talking about all the things that were troublesome for her. The refrigerator broke down, so she has to have a temporary refrigerator, which is too small, and she can't put all of her stuff in it, and she doesn't know where everything is. And then the car battery broke down because it's just an old battery, and the car is old, and now she can't really use the car. She was waiting for AAA to come and check out the battery so that she could know whether she could drive. And then she put this paint on her stove—she painted it black because it was chipping—but they gave her the wrong kind of paint. So the paint she has on the stove now, when she wipes it, the rag gets black. And she doesn't know whether to take all the paint off and put the new paint on.

She was just going on, and then she said, "Oh, I just wish I had peace. I just wish I could find peace in my mind."

And it's so sorrowful, really, that she's just—all these things are so agitating for her. Not really having the view, not having the understanding that it's always going to be like that. This is the conditions of our life, of our life as a human being, having a mind, having a body, living in this world. This is how it is. And yet she doesn't have that perspective. And so there's just this agitation, this constant agitation. Always something. And she can't rest. She can't rest.

And then searching for what's going to actually bring that peace and relieve her of this anxiety—trying to get the conditions right. If I get the conditions right, then I can rest.

Have you heard yourself say this to yourself? If I can just get everything lined up just right, then I can rest. Whether it's the outer conditions, whether it's the inner conditions of mind, body, environment—*then* I can rest.

It's a kind of postponement of our peaceful heart. Once all this gets arranged, once I arrange everything the way I want, then... You know, this kind of sense of arranging the furniture in the room, just constantly arranging things.

But it's never right. It's never right.

For me, this started—I remember so well—when I was around thirteen. I was longing for some different conditions in my life. I was miserable in myself, just searching and searching for something that was going to make me happy. I would read lots of self-improvement books; there were a lot of those out in those years. And then I'd look at Seventeen Magazine, because that had the answers, right? If I could just set up those conditions—have those clothes, have those looks, those boyfriends, that kind of personality I was supposed to have—then I was going to be happy.

Always imagining how life could be better, always moving from this place of disappointment, never really appreciating, couldn't appreciate who I was or what I had. Just a habit, this habit of going through the fantasy, constantly creating a sense of myself through the fantasy of what could be possible.

I remember the first clue I had that maybe I was going to have to give this up. I was twenty-one—so that's about eight years of that. I was finally able to create my life in such a way that I could manifest a dream of going off to Europe and traveling. That matched my self-image at the time—if I could be adventurous, have this journey, this independence. I was with a small group of people on a tour, and we were in Italy, some-

where near Pisa. I remember sitting there looking out over the most exquisite and beautiful landscape, just being where I really wanted to be in my fantasy. And I felt miserable. I was so depressed and unhappy. It was the same thing. Nothing had changed. I was exactly the same person as I always had been, even though I was able to create and manifest these different conditions. I was still miserable.

That was the first time I actually had enough awareness to recognize: okay, I've been doing this for some time. Maybe it's time to shift this. I have to look some other place. I have to look some other way.

We have this conditioned belief, a habitual tendency to believe that somehow, somewhere, there is some kind of permanent refuge for our weary mind, our weary heart. And then this sense of agitation that we can't find it. We can't find it.

But this is actually not a new problem. It's not a problem of the twentieth century or the twenty-first century. The Buddha addresses this very thing, which is why we come to these teachings, to this practice, because it seems to have some helpful answers for us.

This is what the Buddha tells us. He said many things, but this one quote has been very helpful for me: "Agitation comes about because we try to find a permanent refuge in things that are always changing."

It's really a very simple message, and one we keep speaking about. We try to hold on to these changing conditions because we think somehow that's where our happiness lies. But that is the very source of our agitation. Agitation might be another translation for the word dukkha—this stress, this agitation.

We get ourselves into a feedback loop with it, because if we can't find that permanent refuge, then we become more anxious, and we keep searching for the next thing. Unless we somehow get out of that, that's our life. And that's many people's lives. It's called the wheel of samsara, the wheel of birth and death—just being born again and again as the one who is searching and looking in the wrong place, then dying away, then being born again and dying away. This wheel. It's like being in a hamster cage, going around and around and not knowing how to get off.

Something has to change.

Guy also spoke of this when discussing the different kinds of dukkha—particularly parinamadukkha, the psychological pain that arises from grasping onto things that are changing.

But what will get us to stop? What gets us to stop trying to change these conditions that are always changing? They're always changing and they're out of our control—out of the control of ego mind, of ego self, the ego that only knows how to manipulate and control conditions.

That's all the ego knows. It doesn't know anything else. It doesn't know about freedom, about letting go.

So this question: do we need to change the conditions for our peaceful heart? Do we need to change the conditions to find peace?

I've really been so touched by many people that I've met on this retreat who are here with some very, very difficult physical and psychological conditions. I've met a yogi who had a very serious accident, a motorcycle accident, and is having lots of difficulty in his body. People recovering from difficult surgery. People who are in chronic pain and find it very hard to sit for long periods. One person's back went out just here on the retreat—very difficult to sit for long periods. A yogi here dealing with MS. Other people dealing with chronic difficulties. Other people grieving over the loss of loved ones. I mean, there's so much in this room.

I'm just so touched and so moved by people's courage here, the courage to actually sit in this kind of retreat situation and look so directly at what's happening in the mind and body in relationship to these conditions—and practicing letting go, trying to know this place of rest without changing the conditions.

One woman who I was speaking to, who has quite a serious illness, said something very beautiful to me. She had a very important realization. She said that for four years she wanted her body to be well. And then she realized one day: does my body need to be well in order for me to be well? Does my body need to be well in order for me to be well?

And then she realized—she said, "I realize now I want so much more than that." That was a limited view, the way that she had been trying to put so much energy into shifting the way her body was. But she wants so much more than that. She said, "I want to be free. I want to open my heart to compassion for myself and for other beings. I want so much more."

And that realization began to help her to let go, to make room for more of the truth. It opened her up, softened her heart, so that she was able to be even more here, more full with what she was seeing, what she was knowing.

Do we need to change the conditions to find our peaceful heart?

I was talking to a friend just the other day and she told me about this poem that was in the Tibet House newsletter. I asked her to send it to me because it really touched me. It's by a Chinese prisoner who has been in solitary confinement for eighteen years in a Chinese prison. And this is the poem that he wrote:

At dawn, a beam of the sun steals through the window.
At dusk, the sinking Apollo sheds his last tear on the steel door through the light.
Heavily locked, the cell becomes colder and sadder.
Here I have passed eighteen solitary years facing only walls.
Summers, winters came and went.
Spring flowers and autumn moons hide their faces from this place.
Yet I am gratified.
For suffering has always been common for great people.
To this adversity I am deeply beholden.
In hard work and profound thinking, I perceived my inspiration.
Self and other reveal themselves to me.
Everything in this universe is changing, yet they can't confuse me anymore.
I searched for happiness in the hardship, and finding it, the hardship I overcame.
And to a harvest I can lay claim.
Freedom, I lost you—
this is the freedom of being outside in the world—
Freedom, I lost you in pursuit of you.
Though without you, I still feel free in my heart.
Freedom, I lost you in pursuit of you.
Though without you, I still feel free in my heart.

So profound. Really so miraculous that the possibility for each one of us to wake up is here no matter what. No matter what. As long as we have a conscious mind, so much is possible for us. And reading something like that, hearing about something like that, is so inspiring for me—what's possible for us.

When we begin to understand, we can't reach out anymore in the same way that we have been. This tinkering—I call it the tinkering of the ego mind—manipulating, controlling the way things are. This movement of mind that creates so much anxiety for us.

I want to tell you a story about a situation I was in. I've shared it before, so perhaps some of you have heard it. But it was such a powerful experience for me, about ten years ago, when I did a vision quest.

I went out for four nights and five days with about four other people who were also on the quest, and there were two leaders who stayed down at the base camp. I was in England, so I wasn't out in the wilds of Utah or Colorado. It was mild, but it was still a vision quest. Out into this open space, without being near anyone, without any contact with other people. I went out without any food, without any water, taking just a pump because there was a stream where I could filter water when I needed it. I had two tarps and a sleeping bag, and that was going to be my life for five days. Again, wanting to challenge myself, to push the limits of my capacity.

Unfortunately, it rained. And as it does in England, if you know England, the rain can keep going for some time. It rained and rained and rained. Fortunately, the weather wasn't too cool. I was just warm enough—I didn't get cold. But as soon as I started walking out to my spot, about a mile or so from base camp, my boots were already sopping wet. All my clothes were wet. And that was just the beginning. I found a spot underneath a tree, put a tarp up and a tarp under me, had my sleeping bag, and dealt with it. And it rained and it rained and it rained.

Fortunately, I had my practice at that point. Because by the third day, I was wavering. I was sick, nauseous. I didn't know if I was going to be able to keep going. Every part of me felt miserable, felt terrible, felt uncomfortable. Why am I here? Why am I doing this? Maybe the rain stopped for an hour or two, but then it would rain again. And when I would try to sleep at night—I didn't sleep that much—sometimes I'd wake up because there'd be something crawling in my hair, and there'd be slugs. I'd have to pull slugs out of my hair. Really, really uncomfortable.

Because I had my walking meditation, and all I really did was walking meditation, walking back and forth, I started to wonder: What would it mean to be equanimous in this situation? How would anybody actually feel equanimity here? Would equanimity mean that somehow I would no longer feel the discomfort? That I would no longer feel the pain and the sickness and all the difficult conditions? Would I somehow be able to transcend it all, and even though these conditions were so absolutely, utterly horrible, I would just be in the light? Walking back and forth with my wet boots and my wet clothes and my sick feeling, but I wouldn't even notice it? That I would just be in this blissful state—is that what equanimity is?

I just kept walking back and forth, asking and feeling and sensing. What would it mean to be equanimous in this situation? And finally, I understood that there wouldn't be any way to get rid of these conditions unless I went into some kind of very altered

state of concentration, which I wasn't interested in doing at that point. I wanted to know what it would mean to fully be here in presence, embodied, to be equanimous. What does it mean to be equanimous in this world?

What I got was that where the equanimity lives is in the acceptance of what is. Allowing these conditions to be the way they are. They're painful. I'm sick. I'm nauseous. I don't feel good. That's the way it is. And what's my capacity to open to that, to be present with that? That's the question. Not is there a way to transcend this and get over it and go into some kind of white blissful state, but is there a way to work with my own capacity to be present in direct contact with the way I am and to open to that without the reactive mind?

It was a really important and enlightening insight for me. I worked with that, kept working with opening to the acceptance of it. And what came through then was the recognition that in the contact, what's required is care. That I actually need to take care of myself. Because it wasn't a necessarily healthy situation to be out there for three days without any food, with very little water, being somewhat cold, my body temperature starting to go down, starting to get a little weak and sick. This is something that needs attention. In the contact with the direct reality and allowing it to be as it is, there was the possibility for wisdom to come through.

There was the possibility for compassion to come through—not through rejection, not through trying to change it or make myself different, not through trying to transcend in some way, but through that direct contact, through the listening. Then I could access the wisdom and the knowing of how to respond moment to moment to moment.

In that connection, I realized that I had a limited capacity, that I couldn't push through. I couldn't go on anymore. And I did some more walking back and forth. This was the fourth day now, as I kept working with this. I had stayed the third night, and then on the fourth day I just kept sensing: What's my capacity? What's my capacity? And I realized that I needed to go in.

And I did it with complete conscious awareness that this was the wise and compassionate response to the situation—without pushing, without rejecting. I went in to base camp. If you know about vision quests, you can go into base camp early without breaking the quest, and they just take care of you. They put me in a tent up on the hill and gave me a little bowl of miso soup, hot miso soup.

And I was sitting in that tent with a little bowl of miso soup, and I felt like I was in nirvana. I think I experienced one of the happiest mind states I've ever felt in my whole life—sitting in that tent with a little bowl of miso soup. Talk about relativity, right? The

relative condition, conditionality. And I remember just resting there, protected from the rain, warm. They gave me a blanket. And the whole night I was in bliss. I was in bliss. And then the next morning I formally came out of the quest with the other people.

I learned so much in that situation about what is really being expected of me in this practice. What are we doing here? What is this really about?

And this coming into acceptance—I realize that acceptance really is the doorway to a deeper opening, to a deeper understanding, to a deeper connection with the resources of our being: our wisdom, our compassion, the strength of mind, the clarity of mind, the ability to be patient, to hold with care, with love. Acceptance is the first step. We don't end in acceptance. We don't stop in acceptance. It's the beginning. It's what holds us so that we can go further, so that we're not just caught in the reactive mind, the mind that we get entangled in where we can't see clearly. We can't respond well because we're caught in the manipulation, in the control, in the resistance. As soon as we start to come into this place of acceptance, so much opens for us. There's so much more available to us from here.

As we let go, we can begin to sink into the actuality. And yet oftentimes this itself can feel so fearful, because we think that if we really do let go into what's happening, we're going to get overwhelmed. We're going to get sucked in by these difficult conditions and we'll get lost. We'll just get pulled right in and that'll be the end. I think we're often quite afraid of that—that it's going to be too much, that the experience is going to be too much. And in a way, it's a loss of trust in ourselves, a loss of trust in our own capacity to take care of ourselves, to monitor. I really know now that if I'm in touch with myself in this way, I can make choices. I can make clearer choices about when to move more into an experience, or maybe when to back out of an experience, like I did on the vision quest. There's more ability to make this kind of clear choice for ourselves because those resources are there.

So when we open in this way, when we talk about opening to the unfamiliar, about letting go into the unknown, we are vulnerable. We are vulnerable when we let go. Vulnerability is part of this path. And I think sometimes we don't recognize this—we think if we're feeling vulnerable, then something's wrong. But it's part of what we open to: the fact that we are standing here naked in the face of reality that's constantly changing, constantly impacting us, that is completely out of our control, and that we don't know in the next moment what's going to happen. Of course we feel vulnerable when we actually understand and see the size of the cloth, what we're actually being asked to do—which is to let go, let go of everything, to stand here naked in the face of reality.

This is what we mean when we talk about letting go of the small self, letting go of the ego self. We can sometimes use this metaphor of standing naked. There's nothing in the way anymore. Our teacher, Ajahn Sumedho, says it's like standing under a waterfall—a strong waterfall, life impacting in this way. And when we stand under the waterfall, our heart is really touched, it's moved, it's impacted. And sometimes we might ask the question: Can I bear this? Can my heart bear this kind of openness, this kind of vulnerability?

And so sometimes we have to close up. We have to draw on some of our old strategies to protect ourselves from this openness because it's too much. And we may not feel at certain times that we have the capacity to open in that way. We have to shut down. And this is part of the care, this is part of the wisdom, this is part of the compassion—knowing how to navigate, how to negotiate the conditions. Which, as I said, is much more obvious when we're here, when we're in touch with the way things are, when we're seeing clearly.

So we're asked to find some balance in this big waterfall, in this rushing waterfall of life. How do we find our balance? It's not easy. It's challenging for us. But I think we are being asked to bow down to each thing that arises, to receive each condition that arrives on our plate. Even if we can't open to it all the way, at least we can make that choice. When we see it, we bow down, we receive that, and say, "Okay, can I open to you or not? Well, not right now. I have to just back up a little bit." That's okay. You bow down to that. Pay respect to that.

This is from Rumi: "If God said, Rumi, pay homage to everything that has helped you enter my arms, there would not be one experience of my life, not one thought, not one feeling, not any act I would not bow to."

Pay homage to everything that has helped you enter my arms. I think this path takes incredible respect—deep, deep respect to ourselves and to others and the conditions that are arising moment to moment. It requires such a deep honoring of our own humanity, of our own limitations, of our capacities. And in this way, taking such deep care for ourselves as we walk along, as we go along.

And that means even paying deep respect to some of the difficult patterns that arise in our mind because, as I said, they may be acting as a kind of protection for us—because that's as far as we can go right now. If I feel sleepy or restless or agitated, even that sometimes, rather than pushing through—"What's wrong with me? I should be able to do better than this. Why can't I?"—bowing down, paying respect. Okay, what's

happening right now? What do I need for myself right now? Making contact, listening in, taking care. Can we walk with this respect and patience and care for ourselves as we go along?

We don't have to jump in. "Okay, it's time to get enlightened"—with that attitude in mind. I mean, maybe we want to, but just to notice what's happening, what's moving in the heart and the mind. Where is it coming from? Where is that motivation arising from? And knowing it's just this, just this. Everything that we need to know, everything that needs to be revealed for our awakening is being revealed right in this moment, right now. Everything is here. And if you miss it this moment, you'll have another moment. It's all right here. Nothing changes. Nothing is really hidden away. It's just a question of opening our heart, opening our eyes in time.

I think maybe I'll end with this one question—not a poem, but a quote from Arthur Miller, from a play that he wrote called *After the Fall*:

"I think it's a mistake to ever look for hope outside of oneself. One day the house smells of fresh bread, the next of smoke and blood. One day you faint because the gardener cuts his finger off. Within a week you're climbing over corpses of children bombed in a subway. What hope can there be if that is so? I tried to die near the end of the war. The same dream returned each night until I dared not go to sleep and grew quite ill. I dreamed I had a child, and even in the dream I saw it was my life, and it was an idiot, and I ran away. But it always crept back into my lap again, clutched at my clothes, until I thought, if I could kiss it, whatever in it was my own, perhaps I could sleep. And I bent to its broken face, and it was horrible, but I kissed it."

I think one must finally take one's life in one's arms.

Let's sit for a moment.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 33

Working With Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this profound talk from the 2007 IMS Three-Month Retreat, Guy Armstrong offers a comprehensive guide to working with difficult emotions through the lens of the Third Foundation of Mindfulness (cittānupassanā) from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). Drawing from his own transformative journey with fear, Armstrong explains why becoming comfortable with the full range of mental states—rather than trying to eliminate them—is essential preparation for liberation.*
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> *Armstrong presents a practical framework for understanding how the major difficult emotions relate to time and pleasure: sadness connects to pleasant experiences lost in the past, anger to unpleasant past experiences, desire to anticipated future pleasure, and fear to anticipated future pain. For each emotion, he guides practitioners to investigate three dimensions: the physical sensations in the body, the quality or mood in the mind, and the underlying storyline of thoughts that sustains the emotion. He shares personal examples, including his own multi-year investigation of fear, demonstrating how genuine acceptance—being willing to experience a state even if it lasted forever—can fundamentally shift our relationship to what frightens us.*
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> *The talk illuminates how difficult emotions serve as training grounds for developing beautiful qualities of mind. Rather than obstacles to awakening, these challenging states become opportunities to cultivate mindfulness, wisdom, courage, and equanimity. Armstrong weaves in teachings from Pema Chödrön and stories from the Dalai Lama, concluding with Gampopa's Four Blessings: 'Grant your blessings so that confusion dawns as wisdom.' This teaching offers both immediate practical tools and a transformative vision of emotional life as the path itself.*

You've probably tuned into the fact by now that meditation is basically all about the mind. The body is important. The five senses are important. They're a good basis for mindfulness. It's important to understand how we suffer in relation to hanging on to them. But really what we're here to do is to learn about the mind because it's in the mind that we suffer through difficult states—states like fear and anger, embarrassment and humiliation and loneliness and despair. And it's through the mind that we also find the beautiful states, the skillful states of mind, which is how we become liberated. States like mindfulness and wisdom, compassion, joy, contentment, and love.

So fundamentally, what we're here for is to understand this whole range of what goes through our minds, both on the affective level—the level of emotionality or feelings—and also on the cognitive level, the level of understanding. Both these levels are critical to the development of the practice.

I want to talk tonight specifically about working with the range of difficult emotions that come into the mind. You'll see that as we go through the retreat, although we begin talking more about the difficult, as you get settled in, that's what the experience tends to be. And then after you're settled in for a while, we start to talk more about the beautiful states because that's what begins to arise more frequently. So we're still in the early stages of this half, and the talks tend to be loaded on the difficult, but that will start to change.

When I came into meditation practice, it was because of suffering, which I think is more common than not. I was surprised to find that some people come in out of mere curiosity, because I didn't see why anybody would put up with this just out of some intellectual questioning, but apparently there are people who do. I came in because of suffering, and I thought, having read the publicity, that enlightenment would get rid of that. Specifically, I thought that if I could get enlightened, I'd get rid of those difficult and painful emotions that I was grappling with in my life.

It took me quite a few years to realize—I think I was a slow learner—that in fact I had to learn to be comfortable with those states before I had any chance of becoming enlightened. The order of things got quite reversed in my understanding.

Once we're comfortable with all the different places that our mind can go, all the different states that it can move into, then we've found a huge amount of ease and comfort in living this life within this body. It's not the same as liberation, but it brings a lot of freedom. So in a kind of flippant way, you might say that this is like becoming enlightened before we're enlightened—to develop this sort of ease with the whole range of mental states that can come to us.

This is from Pema Chödrön: "In all kinds of situations, we can find out what is true simply by studying ourselves in every nook and cranny, in every black hole and bright spot, whether it's murky, creepy, grisly, splendid, spooky, frightening, joyful, inspiring, peaceful, or wrathful. We can just look at the whole thing."

There's a lot of encouragement to do this, and meditation gives us the method. The beautiful thing is that meditation not only gives us the method, but we find out we have the capability to do this—to investigate all the corners of the mind and to come to a degree of understanding and acceptance in relation to them. This is a big part of the joy of discovery of the path of meditation.

I don't know about you, but when I began this path, I wasn't very familiar with this inner landscape. I don't think our culture is very good at training us in this inner landscape. And I'm not talking just about the culture not telling me how to develop one-pointed states of mind and achieve the third jhāna. It didn't tell me how to know when I was feeling hurt, when I was feeling angry, when I was feeling embarrassed or loving or happy or what any of that meant. So for me, it was not until I came into Dharma practice that I was pointed to looking and inquiring into that inner landscape using the map that the Buddha provided, and coming to greatly appreciate the range that is contained within this human mind, within every human mind. A range that includes very difficult and painful areas, but that also, as you start to open it up and become comfortable, unveils a lot of treasures—understanding of loving-kindness, of compassion and joy, and so forth.

But until we begin this exploration, there are generally, for us as adults, places where we get stuck in difficult corners of the mind. Or it could be we're stuck from clinging to beautiful corners of the mind. Both of those experiences happened to me as I was growing up, and I didn't know how to navigate my way out of them.

Children don't seem to have much stuckness in the range of their mind. Unless they've been abused in some way or their trust has been deeply betrayed, children seem to have this fearlessness in relation to their emotional life. You watch a couple of kids playing, and they'll be joyful and enthusiastic and excited one moment, and they'll be fighting the next—screaming at each other and kicking and pulling hair. And then two minutes later, they'll be playing happily together again. They just flow through all those different states without holding back. Their emotional range doesn't scare them.

But as adults, we seem to have hit some dark corners, and because of that, we've shrunk back from our emotional range. We've become afraid of some corners of our mind, and once we start to close down on one corner of the mind, it exerts a dampening effect on the whole range. So we may start by closing off some of the difficult emotions, but we find as we do that, we close the heart overall and the beautiful emotions are no longer quite so available.

The journey of meditation is a way of reclaiming some of that terrain—that wide terrain that the heart contains that we've lost touch with given the bumps of growing up.

As we start to explore the range, the first impulse, I think, for most of us is that we think spiritual practice is going to help us get rid of the difficult. We hope that through the cultivation of bliss and peace and loving-kindness, we can just kind of glide over the top and end up on some really nice spiritual plane where we don't have to deal with that other stuff anymore. As you know, this is not the path of insight meditation. So congratulations for still being here once you found this out.

This is again from Pema Chödrön: "The basic obstacle is that we don't like the way reality is now and therefore wish it would go away fast. But what we find as practitioners is that nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know. If we run a hundred miles an hour to the other end of the continent in order to get away from the obstacle, we find the very same problem waiting for us when we arrive. Nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know."

So this is our encouragement to look at all the areas of the mind and find out what we can learn from them.

Tonight I'd like to talk about these difficult areas, and I want to introduce it through the context of the Third Foundation of Mindfulness. In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha talked about the four areas in which we establish mindfulness: body, feeling tone or vedanā, the third foundation which is citta, and the fourth foundation called the dhammas, or the principles of nature.

The third foundation of citta is the one that relates to the talk this evening. Citta is a wonderful word in Pali that can be translated as mind. Primarily it gets translated as mind, but it's sometimes translated as heart. The reason is that it includes both cognitive and affective workings of the mind. It seems when the Buddha taught, he didn't see such a polarity between what we sometimes call heart and what we call mind—the mental and the affective were all together, united in his view. So one translator said the best way to translate citta is psyche, a word that encompasses both sides of our mind's nature.

This is the beginning of the description of the third foundation from the Satipaṭṭhāna: "And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind as mind? Here, a bhikkhu understands mind affected by lust as mind affected by lust, and mind unaffected by lust as mind unaffected by lust. She understands mind affected by hatred as mind affected by hatred, and mind unaffected by hatred as mind unaffected by hatred. He understands mind affected by delusion as mind affected by delusion, and mind unaffected by delusion as mind unaffected by delusion."

So here are our old friends of desire, hatred, and delusion, and their opposites—the absence of desire, hatred, and delusion. These three states, which the Buddha referred to as the roots of the wholesome and the roots of the unwholesome, combine to make up all the different kinds of mind states that occur, the whole range. You can take any kind of mind state that comes and look within it for some combination of these three qualities in their wholesome or unwholesome manifestations. Citta is the word in the sutta for this range of mental experiences.

Just a word on the way that I tend to use the language around this subject. I often talk about emotions and the understanding of emotions. Here I mean strong experiences like joy, happiness, love, fear, grief, depression, and so on. I put those in the realm of emotions. Then I might also use the word mood to describe emotional qualities that are not quite as strong. For instance, you might just wake up one day and feel a little bit of melancholy. It might not be quite strong enough to call a really strong emotion, but it's a pervasive tone in the mind. Or you might feel very tender, and the tenderness is like a pervasive coloring in the mind—that's what I would call a mood.

But there's a third term that I'll often use that is very common in the tradition: mind states, mental states, or states of mind. This includes not only emotions and moods, but also the refined qualities of mind that we understand and develop through meditation—qualities like mindfulness, concentration, equanimity, calm, compassion, renunciation. These may not be strong enough to be called emotions; sometimes they're quite refined. But I lump these into a big category called states of mind. Everything that goes on in the mind of this nature can be placed in this third category. In Buddhist language, you'll also hear these talked about as mental factors.

We'll have many things to say later about wholesome states of mind. For now, I just want to mention two things. One, don't cling, as I think you know. Two, please be sure to appreciate them. They are wonderful visitors when they come. Don't take them for granted. Sometimes I'd notice contentment and think, "Well, of course that's contentment. That's what I came for." And then I'd space out. Really take the time to connect mindfully to the beautiful states of mind as well as the difficult.

With difficult states of mind, we need two things through meditation primarily. One is an attitude shift that moves from wanting to get rid of these states to accepting or even welcoming them. Because these are the areas where we are bound, and if we can develop a curiosity and a real interest in them, then we can actually welcome the opportunity to see them. We would rather see the places we're caught so that there's the possibility of release than have them operate subconsciously where we're simply

bound by them. The second movement is a greater understanding of their nature. We have to develop wisdom, and it's ultimately the wisdom that brings the sense of freedom in relationship to them.

So the first step in working with difficult mind states is to know what it is that we're feeling. This is part of that exploration that meditation leads us into. We can become very refined in our discrimination, our ability to tell the difference between related, close states of mind.

Fear was my big exploration for many years in practice, so I got familiar with the varieties: nervousness, anxiety, fear, panic, terror. There's quite a range that that word points to. Or we come to understand the subtle differences between happiness and contentment, for example. The difference between calm and equanimity. Our inner mindfulness has a wonderfully nuanced appreciation of the whole range of qualities that arise, and we just have to start exercising it to get to know what's in us.

So the first step is knowing what our state of mind is as it's happening. But this is not so easy. It sounds easy, but it's not so easy.

I'll give you an example from my practice. I was practicing in this hall on a three-month course some years ago. I'd come for part two, and I'd been settled in for about two weeks at that point. I had gotten into the rhythm of the schedule, doing my sittings and my walking. I like to walk outside, so every walking period I would go down and walk on a path that's on the grassy area at the south end of the property. Every day for two weeks during the walking periods, I'd been walking there.

The sitting ended—I think it was the 8:15 sit. I left the hall. I was walking very mindfully at that point, two weeks settled in: lifting, moving, placing. Walked out the back door. Lifting, moving, placing. I looked down to my walking path, and there was somebody there.

I couldn't believe it. I thought, what is this person doing on my walking path? I've been walking there every period for two weeks. Haven't they been observing? Lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. I felt very present. And I kept thinking, they didn't notice. They're not very developed, are they? Lifting, moving, placing. And then I wondered, are they playing mind games with me? Did I cut in front of them in the breakfast line this morning? Is this their revenge? Lifting, moving, placing.

And what was happening, of course, is that I was annoyed. I was very judgmental, and I was angry. Lifting, moving, placing. I walked down, picked another path. Guess what? It worked just as well. I did my walking period near the person, and it was thirty minutes into the walking before I realized: I'm angry.

Until I realized that, I was so bound up with my reactive irritation that I couldn't dislodge it. It was stuck. There was an identification. That was the truth, and there was no way of moving or shifting it. Even though I thought I was very mindful in being with my feet, I missed the biggest thing that was going on: I was pissed off.

This seems to be partly how we miss what's happening. These hindering qualities slip in under the radar. We have our mindfulness antennae up, but these slip in underneath, take us over, put a filter over our eyes and our whole view of the world—and we don't see that it's happening. The first movement has to be recognizing that the filter is in place, that the mind state is there. As soon as I said, "Oh, anger," then it became workable. I knew how to work with anger. I knew how to feel it in my body, how to feel it in my mind, and then I could start to release it.

In fact, take note: any time you name an emotion, that simple act of naming it, there's a shift that starts to happen in your relationship to it. Because now it is not totally dominating the interior landscape.

There is the emotion, and there is mindfulness. So in the middle of that difficulty, you've brought in a very wholesome quality of mind. And it is this awareness that you can trust at that point to provide the door to wisdom, the door to spaciousness around the emotion. Even naming it makes a difference.

A few people have mentioned how mindfulness is becoming more and more mainstream in society. It's moving into stress reduction, into cognitive therapy, and there are many experiments people are working with. One researcher took a group of people who had anger management issues, and the only instruction they gave them was to simply name anger every time it came up. They watched the subjects over several weeks and evaluated their experience, and they found that outbursts of uncontrollable anger dropped sharply just because of the prescription of naming what was happening to them. This is a powerful first step—to know what the mind state is. This puts us into the quality of mindfulness.

The second step, then, is to feel it. Feel it in your body, first of all. If the emotion has any strength, it will express itself through the body. If you ground your attention in the body where you're feeling it, you can stay in touch with the sensations and also the emotion. What I'd recommend is going back and forth—feeling the sensation (with anger, there may be contraction, pressure), and then going and touching the mood itself, the emotion itself, which is a quality of the mind.

Now, it's one integrated experience. Body and mind are so closely related that we can't pull them apart. When a strong emotion comes, the impact is felt as one unitive experience, but it has two aspects—one physical, one mental or emotional. As you investigate the emotion, go back and forth between tuning into the physical—contraction, pressure, tightness—and then the way it feels in the mind. Get to know that mental quality of anger. For me, it was something like a burning going on in the mind. As you ground the attention in the body, it will help you stay in touch. Several people have said that trying to stay in touch with an emotion is difficult because emotions are kind of cloud-like. But if it's felt in the body, that provides a good grounding point.

Then there's one other area you want to tune into to get the complete picture of the emotion, and that's the area of thoughts. Notice when you're angry what kinds of thoughts you tend to think. This starts to make up what I would call the storyline. Any difficult emotion has a storyline underneath it. The storyline in my walking path scenario was that it was *my* walking path. They were wrong and I was right. Once I could see that belief, I saw that that's what held the anger in—that's what locked it in. And once I could let go of the belief—that walking path did not have my name on it, in fact; it had not been leased to me; it was still open ground—once I saw the belief and could let it go, the anger couldn't sustain itself.

So as we talk about the difficult emotions, I want to point out the different storylines that come in. The Buddha talked about the five hindrances that can obstruct our meditation unfolding. Shaila talked about those last week in a very helpful way. These are essential to get to know—how they manifest in your practice. On the level of difficult emotions, I work with a slightly different list, with some overlap, of the main five strong emotions that I've worked with myself and that I see meditators working with a lot. That list for me is sadness, desire, anger, fear, and self-judgment. Sally talked a lot about self-judgment, so I'm not going to spend a lot of time on that tonight, but I do want to touch on the other four.

As I started to investigate—especially desire, fear, sadness, and anger—I found there was a very interesting relationship here to past and future. Something to note about the afflictive emotions is that they are connected with time. Afflictive emotions depend on past and future in some way to sustain them. Beautiful emotions do not. A beautiful emotion can be a sense of appreciation for the present moment that expresses itself in joy, in mudita. But to sustain an afflictive emotion, there has to be a link to past or future.

So I want to ask you all to reflect on this. The other factor is whether the object is pleasant or unpleasant—pleasurable or painful. Let me ask you to reflect: if there has been a pleasurable experience located in the past—these are the two axes, pleasant and unpleasant, past and future—a pleasant experience that occurred in the past, and by that we assume it's no longer in the present...

What's the emotion that evokes? Let yourself feel into it.

Let me put it a different way. What painful emotion could be evoked? Sadness. This is the quality of loss, isn't it? There was something that was pleasant in the past. We don't have it any longer. There's a sense of loss, and that's the condition for sadness to arise. It doesn't have to, but that's the condition on which sadness builds.

What if there was an unpleasant experience in the past? What might the mind respond to in that case? Anger. Judgment. Yes, anger or judgment, which are both different forms of aversion. So anger is a link to the past, to something that was experienced as unpleasant.

Now we go into the future. What's the relationship to what's pleasurable in the future? Desire. It's wanting, isn't it? And if something is unpleasant in the future, how does the mind often relate? Fear.

I think this is why these are four such primal emotions. They map past and future, pleasant and unpleasant. I didn't realize that when I came up with the list, but having come up with it from seeing my practice and seeing lots of people's practice, it just made sense in this kind of matrix.

So let's talk first about the quality of desire. We've talked around it. Sharda talked about it the other night. It is one of the hindrances—basically, the movement of mind that wants a pleasant experience and wants it now. This can be a very frequent visitor on a retreat. We start off and perhaps it's pleasant experiences that we left at home that we'd like to have again. We miss people, we miss places, we miss certain food or drink or whatever. As the retreat progresses, we find ourselves wanting the experiences of the retreat itself. We have a yearning, a strong wish for a pleasant sitting, a comfortable body experience, a mental state of calm or peace, some particular insight that might have come along, an opening to compassion or love. So it could be external or internal, but let's look at the way that desire functions.

A few years ago, Carol and Sally and I went to Italy and taught a ten-day retreat there. It was a great experience. I'd never taught in Italy before. I really appreciated the yogis there because, you know, all the stereotypes you have about Italians? They all seemed true on the retreat. Noble silence didn't exactly apply in the same way as it does

here. People had cell phones and talked in between. One gentleman from Sicily had brought his seventy-year-old mother on the retreat, and since she was Catholic, they had to stay in touch. There was an espresso machine right outside the dining hall, so always after meals the lira were going in, the espresso was being drunk. In fact, the staff, which was from a convent we rented for the retreat, had a little different understanding of retreat than we do here. When we showed up for dinner the first night, there were carafes of wine out at all the tables. So rather reluctantly we had to tell them to put those away.

But what I really enjoyed about teaching in Italy was the emotional openness that the yogis had. We had to work through a translator because we didn't speak Italian and many people didn't speak English, so it was a little awkward—there was always a third person in the room. But I found people were, in general, very willing to open up about the difficult things going on in their lives, and they had a lot of fluency around their emotions. They were much more willing to dive in and be with the emotional range than I had been in my practice.

There was one young man there, probably about thirty, who came in for his first interview. I said, "How's it going?" And he said, "Oh, having a hard time."

"I don't really want to be here," he said.

"Well, why are you here?" I asked.

"This is our holiday time—August. Some friends of mine were going to the Caribbean for vacation and they invited me to go with them. So I had to choose between going to the Caribbean or coming on this meditation retreat."

"Why did you choose to come here?"

"All the tickets to the Caribbean were sold out."

So he definitely got the consolation prize—sitting and walking for ten days.

"You know, I think about my friends," he said. "They're out on the beach there. The water's so warm. It's beautiful. There are many beautiful girls in the Caribbean. And I'm here."

Well, it was no wonder he couldn't settle.

So we talked about how the force of desire works. When desire is present, is it satisfying? I think this is a very interesting question to investigate, and you'll find many opportunities to examine it. When we're on retreat and deprived of pleasant things, one

of the things the mind does is go into fantasy or daydream or recollection about things that have brought us pleasure. And in that, there is a measure of comfort, a measure of gratification. This is real—we bring the memory of something pleasurable into the mind, projecting it into the future, wanting to have it.

But along with this gratifying aspect, there's also always a feeling of unfulfillment because it's not here now. Because of that inherent frustration, there's something inherently unsatisfying in wanting. When we're in wanting, we can't get settled into the present moment.

This is what I talked about with the yogi on that retreat. He went away and practiced. The next time I saw him for an interview, he had seen that. He'd let go of the Caribbean. He was in the retreat, and he was enjoying it.

Desire is largely about a willingness to see its frustrating nature, to realize the only possibility for contentment is in direct contact with the present moment—and so in letting go of the wanting.

The storyline in desire is something like, "If I had that, I would be happy." It creates the projection of a future happiness. One of the things we don't often inquire into is: how long will that happiness last? Somehow there's this bloom in the mind from desire that makes it seem like it's really going to be a permanent happiness. And we forget about impermanence—that either the thing changes, like an ice cream cone or like sex, or our attitude changes, like toward a new house or a new relationship. Eventually the bloom goes off the rose in one way or another, from without or from within.

When desire is present on retreat, I often find it first in myself—if it's toward meditation objects—by this kind of leaning forward movement in my body, a tension that's like reaching out to grab some concentration or grab some peace. Sometimes it's very hard for me to notice through thoughts or images what I'm striving for in practice. But if I find the body in some tension, then that's often a clue that I'm looking for some kind of meditation experience. And if I can then tune into that, it gives a possibility of releasing.

We talked a little about anger already. Anger is one particular form of aversion—there will probably be another talk on aversion later in the retreat, and Sharda spoke about it with the hindrances. It's the basic attitude of disliking or negativity, but it has so many different forms: ill will, hatred, impatience, frustration, irritation, fear, judgment, blame, resentment, despair, resistance. So many different forms.

Sometimes the mind gets stuck in a long-term habit of aversion. Nothing is ever good enough. This can come out of a chronic sense of fear, a kind of projection that the world is threatening. It can come out of cynicism, where the attitude toward things has become negative. It can come out of a long-term habit of anger.

When aversion has settled in chronically in the heart, the experience becomes contracted and we're really shut off from any opening to joy and happiness and contentment. For myself, coming into practice when fear was a strong tendency in my mind, my heart had become shrunken due to that. One of the things especially recommended when the mind is governed by aversion is the practice of mettā, loving-kindness. In the suttas, loving-kindness is the classical antidote for aversion.

So whether it's coming out of hatred or out of fear, metta is a very useful practice for the aversive temperament.

In anger, generally take a look and see how it feels in the body—there will be contraction, tightness, constriction, tension, often felt in the shoulders, neck, and chest. Take a look at the quality in the mind. See what the coloring or the mood of anger is. As I said, for myself, it was felt as some kind of burning. And then see how the thoughts go. Typically with anger, the thoughts go to blaming. The storyline, you might say, is something like, "They're wrong." And by making them wrong, we get to be right.

But notice how every blaming thought adds more fuel to the fire. As we're angry and we keep thinking the same blaming thoughts over and over again, notice how the flames keep getting fed and keep flaming up. If we cut the thoughts or the storyline, then there's no more fuel being added to the fire, and it will have to die down. So either you can simply stop thinking blaming thoughts, or at an even more fundamental level, you can let go of that story, that belief that the other person is wrong.

It's a judgment call. Sometimes the other person may be wrong. Awful things happen in the world. On a global level, there are murders and war and racism and oppression. Even in our personal lives, living in a fairly protected part of the world, people might steal from us or really hurt us through speech or mistreat us in some way that is thoughtless and unkind. So sometimes people definitely are unskillful. But as long as we're hanging on to that view, who's hurting? Of course, it's us.

There's this lovely story from the Dalai Lama. He is in the habit of receiving the refugees who make their way out of Tibet and come into India. Once he was visited by a monk who had been in prison for twenty years under the Chinese in Tibet. The Dalai Lama had actually known this monk before fleeing Tibet, and he thought he was a fairly ordinary monk at the time. So this monk shows up, having escaped from prison

and made it over the Himalayas. The Dalai Lama asked him how he was. The monk said, "I'm okay now, but I was worried because I was in danger." The Dalai Lama said, "Well, of course, you must have been in danger of being tortured." And the monk said, "Yes, I was tortured, but that's not what I meant. I meant that I was in danger of becoming angry. But I didn't, because I had my practice of compassion. I didn't become angry." The Dalai Lama said he had to revise his opinion of that monk considerably after that.

I find it useful to reflect on things like this when somebody cuts me off on the freeway—that people who have suffered much worse are able to keep their hearts and minds clear, even in the face of aggression and mistreatment.

Once anger came up strongly for me while I was doing a metta retreat here. It was very interesting. "May everybody be happy. May everybody be peaceful." Then there's my difficult person—and I would spin out for thirty minutes being angry at this person who happened to be on the retreat. It was a wonderful opportunity to observe the process because I saw that I was the one burning with the anger. I also saw that part of the anger, a component of it, was ill will. And ill will, if you look into it, means the will to have the other person feel ill—that is, to have the other person hurt.

I couldn't accept the idea that I wanted to hurt somebody else, that I would enjoy somebody else's suffering. That's one of the things that motivated me to let go of the anger. But equally important was that I was the one suffering with it. They didn't know I was upset. They were just going merrily about their practice.

So I came to see that I had this ill will with which I wanted to hurt someone else, and I understood these two analogies from the texts. One is that anger is like a lump of hot coal that we pick up to throw at somebody—but before it hits them, we burn our own hands. The second is that being angry at somebody is like drinking poison and hoping the other person gets sick.

It usually doesn't work.

So can we just open to feel the feeling of anger in the body, feel that mood in the mind, look closely at the thoughts, see how the thoughts just keep adding to the fire? And through the knowing of that unpleasantness, the pain of that fire, let go. Let go of the thoughts, let go of the story about it.

Sally talked a lot about self-judgment, so I won't go into that. Another form of aversion, very helpful to inquire into—also through the three areas that we mentioned of body, of mind, and of thoughts.

The next of the difficult emotions is sadness. Sadness can be an intimidating force to open into because often there's a belief that if we open to the amount of sadness that's in our life, we'll be overwhelmed by it. We'll drown in it. We won't be able to come out of it. Everybody's had disappointments in life. Everybody can tune in to some degree of sadness if they look. But sometimes the losses are big, and it leaves this undigested mass of sadness.

So as we come into meditation and begin to touch that, sometimes it's frightening. The size of it can feel frightening. But this sense—"if I open to it, I'll never come out of it again"—is just a belief. It's just another story. And it's not true. Because all emotions, if we give them space, will exhibit impermanence. It's their nature. It's the nature of all dhammas.

So we just have to trust a little bit at a time. Open to it a bit, experience it a bit, let it lighten a bit, take the mind somewhere else. A little bit at a time we open up to the quality of sadness or disappointment. Again, feel it in the body, get to know it in the mind, take a look at the storyline. And under sadness, it's something like: "I can't be happy now because I've lost this." That's the meaning of the story of loss. "I can't be happy now because of this particular loss."

It's so interesting that all kinds of grief—and you can read this in all the literature about death and dying—have a certain timeline. They go through their own cycles, and the intense heaviness of grief, if we allow it, will in time pass. There may still be some lingering sadness, but it becomes much more bearable if we allow ourselves to open to the intensity of grief in a way that is not holding back.

The last of the major states I wanted to touch on is the quality of fear, because this was kind of my specialty for a lot of years in practice. It's one I have a special affection for. When I first started to encounter fear in meditation, it was totally overwhelming to me. And the first reaction I had when it came was more fear. I didn't know how to relate to it, and I was scared of the experience itself.

So for me, it was very helpful and very instructive to hear the direction: feel it in the body. I started to open to the experience of fear in the body, and I found that there was a contraction in the belly. There was a flutteriness all through the torso, and there was a kind of shaking or light quality that didn't feel grounded and didn't feel secure.

So I would investigate each of those areas, and the question I had in mind was: can I bear this? Can I bear this sensation? The storyline in fear is something like: "This moment is bearable, but the next one's not going to be. Watch out." So coming back just into the present moment diffuses that past-future orientation. That's why it's so helpful—the mindfulness just of the present moment.

So with fear, it was: don't worry about the next moment. Come into this moment. Is it bearable? And as I looked at each of the body sensations, I found, yeah, I can bear that. I don't like it. It's not pleasant, but I can bear it.

Then after getting comfortable with the body sensations, I kind of worked up the nerve to look into the mind. And that was even harder. What's the tone or the quality of the mind that is fear? It's a hard thing to describe, but for me it was a sort of panicky wanting to get away from. And you could call this the flight response. The mind wanted to move away from that experience. It was hard to touch that directly because it wanted to move away from that feeling too.

But through the stability of mind that comes through meditation, I was able to bring the attention, bring the mindfulness directly into contact with that fleeing impulse and feel it. And I thought, can I bear this? Yeah, I can bear this too.

And then, strangely enough, the next moment was not unbearable. The storyline was a lie. The next moment was actually easier once I started to open up.

So I kept investigating fear. It was a companion for a number of years in practice, quite a frequent visitor. And at some point, I'd made a lot of headway in becoming more comfortable, but then—maybe it was a talk of Joseph's, I'm not sure—the question came into my mind: Am I really accepting this?

And then the reflection that followed was: if I really accepted it, it would be okay with me if it lasted the rest of my life. That would be real acceptance.

And I asked myself, am I okay if this lasts the rest of my life? I said, hell no. No way.

And then I had to look at that. Okay, why not? So I looked: why would I not be okay? I can bear this feeling. And the thoughts that came to me were: if I was in fear like this, then I couldn't really enjoy music the way I used to be able to enjoy it. I couldn't really enjoy a sunset the way I used to be able to enjoy it. I couldn't really be in love the way I used to be in love. And then what I noticed was, oh, these are all the ways I used to get high.

So why was I resisting the fear? Because I still wanted to get high in that old way. I thought, is that worth it? No. It was more important to me to open fully to fear than to hold out some future promise of getting high. Because if I could open to the fear, I would have a mind that was unafraid of fear. I would have a mind that was rich in equanimity. And that became more interesting to me and more valuable than the highs that my mind was throwing up.

So at that point I said, yeah, it's okay if this lasts the rest of my life.

And then I continued to practice quite a while like that. Fear would occasionally come, and I developed a complete equanimity over whether it was present or whether it was absent. It really didn't matter to me either way. And when that happened, fear lost its grip on me in some way. It's not that it doesn't return. And every time it returns, I need to refine that relationship with it. But it cannot terrorize me. And it cannot oppress me the way that it used to—as far as I know. I haven't lived a full life yet, so I'll give you a status report as we go. But I feel that something shifted so deeply in my relationship to it that I know how to relate with it. I know how to work with it when it's there.

So fundamentally, what transforms us in our relationship with these states is coming to understand how they're put together. We see the component that is physical. We see the component that is the mood or coloring in the mind. We see how thoughts build them and sustain them. And then also how the absence of thought causes them to crumble. Once we see how these states are put together, they don't mystify us as much and they don't enchant us as much. They arise, and we start to see them just as part of nature.

Just as we observe physical nature and see it's always changing—body sensations pulsing on and off, vibrating—we see that mental nature, which we all share, also comes and goes. All these states are transitory. That's why it's safe to open. You don't have to hold back, because anything that comes, you don't have to make it go away. It will go away on its own. It's the repression that locks them in. So as long as we open, they'll come, they'll manifest, and they'll go. They are just part of our human nature.

We all have this whole package. Everybody knows what fear is. Everybody knows what contentment is. Everybody knows what sadness is. It's not yours or mine. It's part of our human, biological, mental, emotional heritage. So we don't have to take it personally. We simply allow nature to come, to present itself. We understand it through our interest, through our investigation, through our curiosity, through our openness. The mind loses its conflict, loses its struggle with these states.

It takes some time because the mind is very wide and rich. It takes time to investigate each one. This is not a transformation that happens overnight. But through the consistency of our meditation practice, through openness to the range of experiences, little by little, corner by corner, nook by cranny, we start to understand the whole terrain.

In the beginning, I thought that awakening would come after all these states had been disposed of. When I get rid of them, then I can wake up. I have to be comfortable before I can wake up. But I realized it's quite the other way around. We wake up in the middle of these states.

Every time one of these states arises, you might notice your habitual reaction is, "I don't want it. I'm going to push it away. I'm going to strive for something beautiful." Aversion and greed. We start to see this doesn't work. And then we find we have the capacity to turn on this light of mindfulness—of interest, of investigation, of acceptance, of courage, of patience, of tolerance. All these are the beautiful states of mind that we generate from this contact with what's difficult and painful. As we're generating them, we are waking up in the middle of our difficulties.

In a way, these difficult states of mind are the training ground for us to unpack the box of treasures—the beautiful states that support us, strengthen us, and ultimately lift the mind to liberation. It is through knowing our delusion and the difficult emotions that we really grow the seeds of the beautiful qualities of heart and mind.

I want to close with a quotation from the Tibetan tradition. This is called The Four Blessings of Gampopa. Gampopa was a disciple of Milarepa, an eleventh-century practitioner revered as one of the greatest saints in the Tibetan tradition. This quality of blessings you can interpret as you like—it could be directed toward a higher power, it could be directed toward an individual like the Dalai Lama, it could be directed toward your own inner strength and wisdom. You can make of it what you like.

These are the Four Blessings of Gampopa:

Grant your blessings so that my mind follows the Dharma.
Grant your blessings so that my Dharma practice becomes the path.
Grant your blessings so that the path clarifies confusion.
Grant your blessings so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Grant your blessings so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

CHAPTER 34

Arising and Passing Away

Joseph Goldstein · 54 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein illuminates the crucial distinction between consciousness, mindfulness, and wisdom—three aspects of mind that form the foundation of insight practice. He emphasizes how mindfulness serves as a platform for wisdom, and how the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) repeatedly instructs practitioners to contemplate the arising and passing away of phenomena, a refrain appearing thirteen times in the discourse.*
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> *Drawing from the teachings of Ledi Sayādaw, the Buddha's own words, and the Dhammapada, Goldstein explains why seeing impermanence is described as the doorway to all stages of insight and awakening. He explores how this perception eliminates sensual lust, ignorance, and uproots the conceit 'I am.' The talk beautifully unpacks the often-misunderstood terms 'disenchanted,' 'disillusioned,' and 'dispassionate'—revealing them not as negative states but as expressions of freedom from the spell of craving and delusion.*
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> *Through stories of Dīpa Mā's fierce teaching on impermanence following her son's death, the poetic dialogue with a flower from the Tibetan master Shabkar, and modern physics' discovery of yoktoseconds, Goldstein weaves together teachings that point to one truth: everything that arises also passes away. He distinguishes between relaxed and casual practice, and between the establishment and development of mindfulness, offering practical guidance for deepening this liberating insight in every moment of daily life.*

Earlier in the retreat, we differentiated between three different aspects of the mind: consciousness, mindfulness, and wisdom.

Consciousness is the simple act of knowing—knowing different sense objects, which includes objects of mind. This is just the ordinary knowing as we move throughout the day. It's not particularly reflective. It's often conditioned by many of our reactions. It's what I call black lab or golden retriever consciousness. If you just watch them move through the day, just driven by sense impressions—we have a lot of black lab consciousness going on. And for human beings, it's often characterized by being lost in thought.

So this is ordinary consciousness, simple knowing. Mindfulness is when we become aware that we're knowing. With this mindful awareness, we're no longer so caught up and carried away by the stories of our mind, by that inner narration that's going on so often. We're mindful enough to see and to observe what is going on within us and also in the world around us.

As the momentum of mindfulness increases—and the momentum increases through a steady continuity of awareness, that's what builds it—mindfulness then starts to flow along by itself. At this point, it doesn't really require that much effort. The steadiness and continuity of awareness, of mindfulness, does not come about through forceful efforting. It comes about through a steady but relaxed openness to whatever it is that's arising.

But here I'd like to draw an important distinction between things that sometimes get confused in practice. It's important to understand the difference between a relaxed practice and a casual practice, because these two are really quite different. Casual is the state of mind which I call "more or less mindful." We're kind of mindful. We're kind of there. We're more or less there. But we're not really there in a careful way. So don't confuse this state of casualness with a relaxed but caring attention.

This distinction is very important if we want to deepen our practice, to really build the momentum of mindfulness. We want to do it in a very relaxed way, settled back into the moment. It's not forcing, it's not efforting, but there's a great deal of care and interest and attentiveness involved. So really pay attention as you move through the day. You might find that you have this careful awareness as you sit and maybe in the walking meditation, but then at other times you might find it becoming more casual. Notice that and see if you can bring the relaxed continuity throughout the entire day.

As awareness—and I'm using it here synonymously with mindfulness, although sometimes it has a slightly different meaning—as the awareness or mindfulness gets steadier, gets stronger, it becomes a platform for wisdom. It's not enough to be mindful. It's not enough to be aware. We want to use the awareness as a platform for learning something about what we're observing. When we're aware of something, what are we learning? Is there an investigation? This is the growth of wisdom.

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, which is the discourse the Buddha gave on the four foundations of mindfulness, there is a refrain that is repeated after each particular set of instructions. In this refrain, the Buddha is telling us very directly how to investigate. The instruction is very clear. He is pointing in this refrain to the wisdom that liberates the

heart and the mind. And in this discourse, in this sutta, which is just not very many pages long, the refrain occurs thirteen different times. So perhaps the Buddha is trying to tell us something that we should pay attention to.

Tonight I want to talk about this particular wisdom aspect of the practice, where the Buddha tells us in this refrain to abide contemplating the arising, the passing away, and both the arising and passing away of each object of awareness. Abide contemplating the arising, the passing away, both the arising and passing away, of whatever it is that arises in our experience.

Ledi Sayadaw, who was one of the very great Burmese masters—a meditation master and a great scholar of Buddhism who lived in the early 1900s—said that not seeing arising and passing away is ignorance, while seeing all phenomena as impermanent is the doorway to all the stages of insight and awakening. Again, it's a very clear instruction about the direction of our practice.

Not seeing arising and passing away is ignorance. And seeing impermanence is the doorway to all the stages of insight and awakening.

The Buddha emphasized this understanding in many different ways. In one teaching he talked about different levels of meritorious action. Of course he began with the great benefit of generosity and how meritorious, how purifying that action is. He described how the power of generosity is made more profound by the purity of the giver, the purity of the gift, the purity of the receiver. So, for example, if one gives something to the Buddha or to enlightened beings, it's like planting seeds in a very fertile field. There's tremendous abundance that comes from that gift.

But then he said something quite remarkable. He said that better than giving, more meritorious than giving to the Buddha himself and the whole order of enlightened monks and nuns, would be one moment's absorption in the feeling of loving-kindness. So powerful is one moment of being absorbed in metta.

And then he went on to say that many times more powerful than even being absorbed in the feeling of loving-kindness is the direct, clear seeing of the arising and passing away of phenomena. So you may think as you go through the day, "What is going on here? Is anything being accomplished?" To whatever degree we're seeing the impermanence of phenomena, it's a tremendously powerful, transforming insight, even though we may not be realizing it at the time, because we're learning something very profound about the nature of the mind and the body and the world.

The Buddha said, "When, bhikkhus, the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual lust, it eliminates all ignorance, it uproots the conceit 'I am.'" When the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it accomplishes some pretty extraordinary things. This is no small accomplishment—eliminating all sensual lust, all ignorance, and uprooting the conceit "I am," all from watching the arising and passing away of phenomena.

At one time, the Buddha's cousin and attendant, the very beloved monk Ananda, was speaking to the Buddha and recalling all of the marvelous qualities of the Buddha—someone who had brought to perfection all of the qualities, the paramis, of generosity and renunciation and love and kindness and compassion and truthfulness and wisdom, this whole long list of virtues the Buddha had brought to completion. Ananda was going on and on about all the wonderful qualities of the Buddha.

And then the Buddha replied, "That being so, Ananda, remember this too as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Tathagata"—which is how the Buddha referred to himself. "Remember this too as a wonderful and marvelous quality: for the Tathagata, feelings are known as they arise, as they are present, as they disappear. Perceptions are known as they arise, are present, and disappear. Thoughts are known as they arise, are present, as they disappear. Remember this too, Ananda, as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Tathagata."

Is the message coming through? Seeing the arising and passing away, seeing clearly and repeatedly the impermanence of feelings, the impermanence of perceptions, the impermanence of thoughts. These are not subtle things. These are just the ordinary aspects of our experience. But we want to be paying attention with wisdom as these different aspects of experience arise.

So it's very simple. Understanding this is not complicated. But we might ask, why is this a marvelous quality of the Tathagata? What makes the seeing of impermanence so powerful? How does it eliminate sensual lust and ignorance and uproot conceit?

In many places in the suttas, the Buddha said that when we see that everything that arises also passes away, that whatever is subject to arising is also subject to passing away, in seeing this we become disenchanted and disillusioned. Becoming disenchanted, we become dispassionate, and through dispassion the mind is liberated.

Through seeing impermanence, we become disenchanted, disillusioned, dispassionate. But right here, in these words of liberating wisdom, it's not uncommon for doubts to arise. Because in English, the words disenchanted, disillusioned, dispassionate have quite negative connotations. We think of being disillusioned or disenchanted—these mindstates don't sound all that appealing. Is this what I'm practicing for?

But if we examine their meaning more closely, we can begin to understand their connection to freedom—not as an abstract ideal, not as something far off in the future, but in our present, moment-to-moment experience.

Becoming disenchanted means breaking the spell of enchantment. It's waking up into a fuller and greater reality. This is precisely the happy ending of so many myths and fairy tales—people waking up from the spell of enchantment. We wake up from a spell of sleep, from the spell of delusion. One way we experience this many times a day is when we wake up from having been lost in a thought or a daydream. When we're lost, it's like being enchanted. And then we wake up. Pay attention to that moment of waking up.

What is it like? That moment is very significant because we're going from delusion to wisdom. We're going from sleep to wakefulness. What is the wakeful mind like? We have a chance to experience it so directly, many times a day. So watch the mind, watch the quality of the mind at that time.

We can also understand the power of enchantment and how often we're in its spell when we see how desire casts its spell on the mind. It might be for some little thing. It might be a full-blown obsession. For the duration of the desire, for however long we're lost in it, we have only one thing on our minds. It's like this great tunnel vision.

A retreat is a wonderful place to begin to observe this because the possibility for fulfilling our desires is somewhat limited. We still find ways, but there's much less possibility here than when we're living our lives in the world. So we have a chance to really look carefully and to see what is going on when the mind is under the spell, in the enchantment of desire.

So we look, we pay attention. When desire or the wanting mind arises, notice the feeling of its compelling nature, just how it grips us. And again, it might be for quite different things. It might be a sexual fantasy that just compels the mind, or a longing to be with somebody, or a desire for a favorite food, or desire in the form of endless planning, desiring to be something in the future.

And then, if you can, notice the very moment when the desire leaves, when it passes away—because it always will. Has anybody had unremitting desire from the beginning of the retreat? You may have had many, but they all arise and are there for some time and pass away. Pay attention just to that moment when the desire passes away. It feels like we've suddenly been let out of the grip of something.

I have this image of a great hawk or some bird with big talons having grabbed something. It's like desire grabs the mind like that. And then when the desire passes, it's like this huge sense of relief and openness back into the present. But this is not something to believe. This is something really to investigate for yourself. See what it's like. Desire is there and it's not there.

There's a simple everyday example of this enchantment of the wanting mind, the spell that it casts on us. It's something I call catalog consciousness. Have you had the experience, not here, but when you're home, of making the mistake of opening a catalog and then turning the pages, waiting for something to want? It's like, "Oh, nothing on this page, maybe on the next page I'll want something." We're wanting to want. And do you know the sense of relief when you finally get to the last page? We're out of the grip of it. That's the spell. That's the enchantment.

And this is what the Buddha is talking about. Through the seeing of impermanence, we become disenchanted. So this is not some gloomy state. This is a place of freedom. Likewise, disillusioned is not the same as being discouraged or disappointed. Being disillusioned is a reconnection with what is true. Why should we want to live in illusion? Disillusion—that's what our whole practice is about. It's about waking up to what is true.

And dispassion doesn't mean indifference. It doesn't mean apathy. Dispassion really is a mind of great openness and equanimity that is free from the confines of wanting and grasping.

A sustained contemplation of impermanence frees our minds. It leads to a shift in the way we experience reality.

We begin to see through the illusion of some stable, self-centered existence, both in what is perceived and also in what is perceiving. We simply see the constant play of change.

Science has been illuminating this in some very profound ways. In a recent issue of *Inquiring Mind*, the editor Wes Nisker—who is also a teacher and good friend—wrote one of his wonderful columns on science and the dharma. I happened to come across it, and he writes:

"Inside the subatomic world, we find evidence of an impermanence that is so impermanent it makes our ordinary reality seem frozen in time. Way down inside of everything, where the quarks are doing a line dance inside of an electron, events are occurring in increments far shorter than the blink of an eye, considered to be one-tenth of a second. In the subatomic world, time is sometimes measured in what scientists have named attoseconds—a millionth of a trillionth of a second. It takes an electron about one attosecond to travel all the way around a proton. That's a millionth of a trillionth of a second. Meanwhile, inside the proton, perhaps one level deeper into reality, an attosecond would be regarded as a long nap. Down here, time is measured in zeptoseconds, which is a billionth of a trillionth of a second—before you can even blink. Zepto, it's gone."

I think at some point the physicists realized they had entered a Marx Brothers routine, where the jokes are coming so fast you begin to see that it's all a joke. So when they started measuring things changing even faster, in trillionths of a trillionth of a second, they named it a yoctosecond. Atto, zepto, and yocto. The time it takes for a quark to circle around inside a proton is somewhere between a zeptosecond and a yoctosecond. All you can do is smile and let go.

That's a whole other level of seeing impermanence. Now, it's likely we have not quite refined our attention to the level of yoctoseconds, but we can be mindful of impermanence on very many levels, both internally and externally, so that we're no longer so caught in grasping, so that we don't drown so much in the suffering that comes from it.

Sometimes the truth of change is so ordinary that we have stopped paying attention to it. We simply overlook it. Most obvious—and it's very obvious here—are the changes in nature, the changes of the weather. It's just changing continually. Or on a larger scale, the climate changes occurring across the planet, or the evolution and extinction of species. Every place in nature, when we look, change is so obvious.

We see changes in society on the collective level—the rise and fall of civilizations. As mentioned earlier, the Buddha said that the perception of impermanence uproots the conceit "I am." This insight might help us on the national level as well. As a society, if we believe our ascendance, our wealth, our power will always be there, we really are strengthening the national ego. And so often then we respond to situations in the world in very inappropriate and harmful ways. Just as ego-centeredness on a personal level results in a great deal of harm, on a national level it is the same process. It comes about because we do not acknowledge, on the level of civilization and society, that it's all changing.

Understanding deeply the truth of change—the inevitable rise and fall of our own civilization, our own culture and society—brings a much greater sense of humility and compassion.

On a more personal level, we see impermanence in generations of people being born and dying. One of the beautiful things about these woods in New England is walking through and seeing miles of stone walls and old stone foundations of houses, where now trees are just growing up through them. What histories, what life stories are told by those stones—and what is left? Where are all those stories now? Where are all those people now? Where are all those lives now?

We can see the changing nature of our relationships, our work, and most intimately, our bodies and minds.

It's possible to acknowledge the truth of change but perhaps in a way that is still somewhat abstracted. This is not an obscure truth. We could go out to anybody on the street and say, "Do things change?" and everybody would say yes. But somehow it's abstracted from our lives, almost as if change happens to everyone else. We haven't really internalized the depth of this understanding, the profundity of this wisdom.

I'd like to read something. It's a little long, but it's a beautiful teaching on impermanence from the great Tibetan master Shabkar, one of the great Dzogchen masters from perhaps the eighteenth century, possibly the seventeenth. He wandered in the mountains of Tibet. This is from a book called *The Life of Shabkar*.

One day I went for some fresh air to a meadow covered with flowers. While singing and remaining in a state of awareness, I noticed among the profusion of flowers spread out before me one particular flower waving gently on its long stem and giving out a sweet fragrance. As it swayed from side to side, I heard this song in the rustling of its petals.

This is the flower speaking:

"Listen to me, mountain dweller. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but in fact, you even lack awareness of impermanence and death, let alone any realization of emptiness. For those with such awareness, all phenomena teach impermanence and death. I, the flower, will now give you, the yogi, a bit of helpful advice.

A flower born in a meadow, I enjoy perfect happiness with my brightly colored petals in full bloom. Surrounded by an eager cloud of bees, I dance gaily, swaying gently with the wind. When a fine rain falls, my petals wrap around me. When the sun shines,

I open like a smile. Right now I look well enough, but I won't last long—not at all. Unwelcome frost will dull the vivid colors till, turning brown, I wither. Later still, winds violent and merciless will tear me apart until I turn to dust.

You, hermit, are of the same nature. Surrounded by a host of disciples, you enjoy a fine complexion. Your body of flesh and blood is full of life. When others praise you, you dance with joy. Right now you look well enough, but you won't last long—not at all. Unhealthy aging will steal away your healthy vigor. Your hair will whiten and your back will grow bent. When touched by the merciless hands of illness and death, you will leave this world for the next life. Since you, mountain-roaming hermit, and I, a mountain-born flower, are mountain friends, I have offered you these words of good advice."

Then the flower fell silent and remained still.

In reply I sang, "O brilliant, exquisite flower, your discourse on impermanence is wonderful indeed, but what shall the two of us do? Is there nothing that can be done?"

The flower replied, "Among all the activities of samsara, there is not one thing that is lasting. Whatever is born will die. Whatever is joined will come apart. Whatever is gathered will disperse. Whatever is high will fall. Having considered this, I resolve not to be attached to these lush meadows, even now, in the full glory of my display, even as my petals unfold in splendor. You too, while strong and fit, should abandon your clinging, meditate in solitude, seek the pure field of freedom, the great serenity."

Even flowers can teach us. It's all around—the same teaching everywhere. But do we take it in? Do we really reflect on it deeply in our practice? Are we paying attention to this truth which is manifesting every moment: that whatever arises is also passing away? There is no exception.

Sometimes this teaching can be very fierce.

Many of you have heard us speak at different times of our wonderful teacher Dipa Ma, who was this extraordinary woman who had tremendous suffering in her life. She was Bengali, living in Burma as a young woman. She married, didn't have children for a long time—which was a tremendous disappointment—and then had three children, one after the other. In a very short period of time, her husband died and two of her children died. She was devastated by grief. She said that basically she was in bed for five years, and her family and friends thought she was going to die.

Finally somebody urged her to go to one of the monasteries to meditate. She ended up going, and her paramis suddenly came to full fruition. She was an extraordinary yogi, and in a very short period of time had developed very high stages of enlightenment, all the levels of concentration, all the many psychic powers that come with that. She was an amazing practitioner.

In meeting her after her time in Burma, when she was living in India, she was simply a being completely full of love. It was like love and emptiness as one. A Sufi teacher described being hugged by Dipa Ma "so thoroughly that all my six feet fit into her great, vast, empty heart with room for the whole of creation." And it was like that. Her heart was so full of unconditional love.

When my son died in 1984, Deepa Ma shocked me with her words. It was a hard teaching I have not forgotten. "Today your son has gone from this world. Why are you shocked? Everything is impermanent. Your life is impermanent. Your husband is impermanent. Your son is impermanent. Your money is impermanent. Your building is impermanent. Everything is impermanent. There is nothing that is permanent. When you are alive, you might think, this is my daughter, this is my husband, this is my property, this is my building, this car belongs to me. But when you are dead, nothing is yours. Sudipti, you think you are a serious meditator, but you must really learn that everything is impermanent."

That's an amazing teaching in that situation, and it could only come from somebody like Deepa Ma who had experienced this herself. This was not abstract philosophy. This is somebody who had gone through that suffering and come out to a place of tremendous wisdom and freedom. We need to take it in on all of these levels.

The truth of impermanence is very profound, and our practice is learning to see it and open to it on deeper and deeper levels. What is so surprising, given that impermanence shows itself in so many ways all around us and within us, is that we still find change surprising. That's what's surprising—that somehow in our lives, in our meditation practice, we count on things staying a certain way. Or at least if they're going to change, that they change in the way we want them to change, that they'll change to our liking.

There's a mantra that came to mind in my practice which has really helped me. The little mantra is: anything can happen anytime. When people first hear that, they might think it sounds like such a fearful state. It's exactly the opposite. When that phrase came to mind, it was in a time of change that I was not looking for. When I settled into the understanding of it, it was a huge relief, because it was letting go of the defensive-

ness against the world, defensiveness against change. Change is what characterizes every aspect of our experience. When we recognize that, when we open to it, it changes our relationship to it. It actually brings us to a place of great peace.

How many times in your meditation—and this has happened to me so many times—we might be having a really clear, concentrated, calm sitting. The bell rings, we get up, we do the walking, and come back expecting to pick up just where we left off. And then when we don't, when the body hurts and the mind is restless, the mind starts thinking, "Oh, what did I do wrong? How did I mess up?" It's not that anything was wrong. Things change. Conditions change. And much more important than having a calm sitting is understanding that things change. That would be a much more fruitful understanding than simply sitting in a place of calm. We can use everything that happens to deepen this wisdom.

When we pay careful attention, we see that everything is disappearing and new things arising in every single moment. When you walk out of the hall after the talk, try a little experiment as a way of practicing this: notice the rapid flow of changes, the flow of visual forms as you're walking out, the changing sounds of people moving, the changing sensations in the body as you're walking, the fleeting thoughts that may be coming and going. Every moment, a flow of change is happening. And what happens to each of these experiences? Do any of them last at all?

This truth of change is so obvious and so ever-present that most of us have stopped paying attention to it. And yet all the teachings of the Buddha, and Shabkar, and Deepa Ma—they're all reminding us this is what we have to look at, this is what we have to understand, not abstractly. We really have to be living this understanding.

In one discourse, the Buddha makes a distinction between the establishment of mindfulness and the development of mindfulness. This is a very interesting distinction.

As the mindfulness gets stronger, as the momentum of awareness builds, our practice shifts from the establishment of mindfulness to the development of mindfulness. The establishment of mindfulness means paying attention in the moment to what is arising—there's this, there's this, there's this. We're getting very clear, moment after moment, about what it is that's arising.

As our practice deepens, we move into the development of mindfulness, which is the awareness of the process of change itself. This becomes more predominant for us. We begin to pay more attention to the process of things arising and passing than to what it

is that's arising. We go from content to process. We see that whatever is arising on any level of perception, whatever arises will pass away, that all experience is just this endless flow, this endless passing show.

It's like the fast-flowing current of a river or water coming down over a waterfall. Do you ever go to a waterfall and just watch the water? It's really interesting. It's such a vivid experience—just ever-flowing change. Moment after moment, there's no let-up.

The Buddha said in the Dhammapada, and this is quite a remarkable statement: "It's better to live a single day seeing the momentary rise and fall of phenomena than to live a hundred years without seeing it." What does this say about everything we value in our lives, what we think is important, where we put our energy? The Buddha is saying that it's better to live a single day seeing this momentariness of phenomena than a hundred years doing whatever it is we do without seeing it.

Because the more clearly, steadily, consistently, and repeatedly we see the changing nature of phenomena, of experience, it reorients our minds. It reorients our minds towards care and loving-kindness rather than clinging and attachment. It reorients our minds towards letting go rather than grasping. It reorients our minds toward the experience of freedom.

So this is our practice in each moment—seeing the arising and passing over and over again, and then noticing the profound transformation of our hearts and minds from that seeing.

This is not just for people who are monks or nuns or renunciates, people who have renounced the world. On one occasion, a layman came to see the Buddha—somebody living the lay life, as most of us are. This man's name was Mahanama, and he asked the Buddha, "In what way, sir, is a lay follower accomplished in wisdom?" This is a question we might well ask the Buddha if we met him.

The Buddha replied, "Mahanama, a lay follower is wise, possessing wisdom, when the mind is directed to arising and passing away. This is a wisdom that is noble and penetrative, leading to the complete destruction of suffering. In this way is a lay follower accomplished in wisdom."

Such a clear and direct teaching.

I'd like to close with one of the most beautiful expressions of the fruit of this wisdom. We have our ordinary consciousness just rolling along through the day. We practice mindfulness. We practice being aware. We use awareness as the platform for wisdom. Once we're aware, then we can really look and investigate and see, learn from what it is that's arising. We pay attention to the arising and passing of phenomena.

This is from a book called *Women of the Way: 2,500 Years of Buddhist Wisdom*. It's a story of Teijitsu, who was the abbess of a nunnery in Japan:

"She saw the arising. She saw that the arisings of phenomena arose, abided, and fell away. She saw that knowing this arose, abided, and fell away. Then she knew there was nothing more than this, no ground, nothing to lean on stronger than the cane she held, nothing to lean upon at all, and no one to lean. And she opened the clenched fist in her mind and let go and fell into the midst of everything."

This is our practice. This is the freedom. She opened the clenched fist in her mind and let go and fell into the midst of everything.

Again, see if you can get a feel for settling back, being relaxed, but not casual. Relaxed, settled back, open. The phenomena that arise—they're doing all the work. They're coming and going by themselves. We don't have to do anything except sit and recognize that.

As Ajahn Buddhadasa said, one of the great Thai masters: there's nothing to do, nothing to be, nothing to have.

All right here in the sound of the bell.

CHAPTER 35

Nature of Insight

Carol Wilson · 1h04

> *In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson examines the essential nature of insight (paññā) and how wisdom actually arises in meditation practice. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching to Suppabuddha the leper, she reveals that insight is not something created through willpower but rather a spontaneous shift of perception that occurs when the mind is free from clinging—open, malleable, and bright.*
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> *Wilson uses the vivid analogy of Magic Eye graphics to illustrate how insight works: just as a hidden image suddenly appears when we look with steady, relaxed attention, wisdom arises when the quality of mind shifts from contracted self-reference to spacious openness. She distinguishes between 'kilesa mind'—consciousness colored by greed, aversion, and delusion that can only perceive concepts—and 'vipassanā mind,' which can observe things as they actually are.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for when intensive moment-to-moment mindfulness becomes counterproductively self-absorbed. Wilson presents the Buddha's step-by-step approach of cultivating dāna (generosity), sīla (ethical conduct), and other wholesome qualities as skillful means to brighten and open the heart. She explores how the brahmavihāras, bodhicitta, gratitude, and reflecting on past virtue can support the non-clinging quality of consciousness in which insight naturally unfolds. This teaching reminds practitioners that awakening happens through any experience when the attitude of mind is pure, not through achieving special meditation states.*

After Joseph's beautiful talk last night about cultivating wisdom and the perception of insight into impermanence, I wanted to talk a little bit tonight about the nature of insight, of wisdom. What is it? How does it arise? What supports its arising?

This is insight meditation, so what do we mean by insight? Insight is really an aspect of wisdom, paññā, a mental factor that comes and goes in the mind stream like any other mental factor. It's not something we can create by willpower. I don't know if you believe that yet, but it's true.

So what actually is an insight? Is it something created new, some new thing or way of being that suddenly comes into being that hasn't been here before, that now we're somehow different and new, or the world is different and new, some new way of thinking about things? Does the situation change? No, no, no, no to any of that.

Remember the quotation Joseph read where the Buddha said that the perception of impermanence, the perception of anicca, basically leads to the ending of the conceit of self. And really, that's what insight is. It's a shift of perception. We experience it not as a thought. Insight is basically not thought. It's a kind of aha. Something in the mind shifts and we perceive a particular situation in a new way, from another angle. Has everything changed, or is it just that our view has changed? Really, something in the mind lets go and we're able to see in a new way.

In speaking of the Eightfold Path beginning with right view, sometimes I think that's actually quite literal. Right view: accurate perception, accurately seeing ourselves and the world as it is. So it's not a matter of thinking. Of course we'll think about it. Thinking will come, but that's usually after.

The example I always use, because for me it really works well, of what I mean by this, what insight really is, is those Magic Eye graphics. You know what I mean. They used to have books and books of them, where you look and it's just little graphic designs. There's nothing, no picture that you can tell what it is. When you look, it's just red and green, red and green, little designs. If you look in the right way, and the right way happens to be steadily, without looking away, but relaxed, unfocused, suddenly out pops some other literal design, like a spaceship or dinosaurs or whatever.

Now, if you go to that and you haven't seen it before and you say, "I know there's dinosaurs. I'm looking for dinosaurs," you won't see it. And some people never really get the knack. But once you've done it once or twice, you see the steady, steady way of looking, unfocused, relaxed, and boom, out pops the thing. And it doesn't last, does it? It goes back and you see it the other way again. But having had that shift of perception, you know that that's possible. You know that there's both ways of looking at that particular experience.

Once you learn how to do it and you practice, you go through the whole book—oh, this is a dinosaur, this is a spaceship—you learn how to do it. The first time is amazing. Wow. By the end of it, it's like, oh yeah, well, that's how it is. You don't have to think about it anymore. It's made a shift in your mind stream, a shift in your understanding.

Even though the seeing of the dinosaurs doesn't stay, the knowing that it's that way—the first time it's amazing, but then it starts to have an effect on your mind stream. Until it's just our whole view, our whole understanding that we didn't even know we were clinging to has changed, and we know there's something else in that. And it's no big deal. You don't have to have an argument with someone about it. You can't show anyone else. But if someone came up to you and said, "No, that's not true," you don't have to get all upset. You're not defending a view. You just know—oh, well, it is.

I'm sorry you can't see it. You know, there's nothing to get upset about.

So that really, to me, works very well with insight—whether it's insight into impermanence, into not-self, whether it's insight into a particular problem, a personality problem, a mathematical problem (not that I know anything about that), or a scientific problem. Something lets go that we didn't know we were holding to. It's like this, this is right, and we don't even know—oh, we see it from another angle. That's just a quick aha moment.

And as I was saying, the moment just doesn't last but a second. I don't know, maybe it's longer than a yoctosecond or whatever it is. It's a little more measurable, but it doesn't last very long. But the time is irrelevant. It has an effect on our understanding, on our mind stream. Something has changed. We're never quite so fixed. Yet we can't hold on to that moment of insight, that sense of, "Ah, it's really different."

We try. First there's just a thought, because that's how most of us—maybe not everyone, but for most of us—really thinking is how we kind of... it comes secondary, but it's how we think we're understanding something, holding on. "Oh yeah, I really do see something. That emotion wasn't here before, and now it's here, and it'll go away. I really do get it that it's all impermanent."

But that thought's really not carrying anything. It's describing, but it's not really carrying the freshness of the insight. You'll notice the first one or two thoughts is kind of, "Oh, that's interesting," and then it goes on and on. And it's okay—cut it. Two thoughts is enough. Just go back to what's happening in this next moment.

But we say, "No, let me feel that again. It is impermanent. It is impermanent. I'm really seeing impermanence everywhere." And it's long gone. It's just become a concept again.

But the moment of insight—and this is what's really interesting—it can happen with any kind of experience. It doesn't have to only be in some really deep, subtle state. It's just that shift of perception. It's about the quality of the mind at that moment, not about the quality of the experience itself.

Here's an example—this is one any of you could have said. Someone told me this at a retreat a few years ago. She was having a very uncomfortable sitting, a lot of restlessness. Not dying pain, but restlessness, really uncomfortable, couldn't sit still. So she stood up to just stand and be with standing. Well, standing, she was still really restless, uncomfortable. And of course, when you're standing, you're one step closer to being able to walk and just walk on out of the hall. So she was standing there thinking, "This is really stupid. I should just leave and fix it." You know, that would fix it. The problem

is this restlessness, this uncomfortableness. Fixing it would be to just get the heck out of here. Of course, she was at the back of the hall, and it was a crowded hall and hard to get out. That probably had something to do with why she didn't leave.

But anyway, as she stood there, just kept noticing, she suddenly became aware—and it was very profound for her. How did she say it? "Oh, it's just uncomfortable sensation. That's what's happening. An aversion in the mind." But really seeing: oh, uncomfortable sensation and aversion, and that's all it is. It's really not a problem.

So in seeing the uncomfortable instead of the whole story about "I have to do something, this can't be borne," in seeing aversion where aversion simply becomes another arising mental experience at that point—oh, no problem. And it was really very profound for her, seeing that the freedom, the ease, the peace wasn't about getting rid of the situation. I mean, that's what we've been talking about the whole time. And that's what we each know. But when we have an experience like that for ourselves, it really deepens our insight.

That's a moment of wisdom. And it really deepens our faith, our trust. *Oh yes, that really is true. This really might be the way.* And it's very different from someone telling us, from thinking about it. That shift can happen in any moment with any experience. It's not about getting a better experience to have a better insight.

So that's where I want to go with this—talking about what supports, what enables this shift of perception. This non-willpowered suddenly letting go of the beliefs, the ideas, the viewpoints we're holding to that we don't even know we're holding to. When the Buddha talked about the perception of impermanence, it's not that we're consciously going around saying, "I perceive permanence, I want to perceive permanence." We don't even think in those terms. Unconsciously, we're perceiving permanence and not even knowing it—the assumption of permanence, just as he was talking about that.

When insight arises, when wisdom—*paññā*—arises in the mind, it arises because in that moment the quality of mind, of heart, of consciousness (these are all kind of the same thing) is in a state of openness, of non-clinging. It's interesting—the Buddha said that the supreme state of sublime peace has been discovered by the Tathagata, namely, liberation through non-clinging. Liberation through non-clinging could be thought of or seen as the end of our path. In a way, that's what they say is the experience of the Arhat. But it's not only the end of the path. It's the moment-to-moment unfolding of the path. Wisdom insight arises only in a mind moment that is free from clinging, that is not contracted and closed around the incredible starring role of me, me, me—where there's just like a fraction of a millimeter of space for something other to be perceived.

So what supports this opening, this purity, this non-clinging quality of mind? That's really, in some ways, what you could say the practice is about. It's not that the experience needs to change. Suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering in this particular experience, in the big picture—doesn't really change. The mind that's holding to something, that's colored by *kilesa*, by greed, by fear, by aversion, by views, by me, me, me—something in it allows it to open. Clinging doesn't arise.

Moment by moment, steady awareness—that's what we're practicing here—leads to a kind of stability. The continuity allows for the *kilesa* to be seen and not fed, allows for wisdom to arise. But that's not the only way. There are other things I want to talk about tonight.

We tend, especially in a meditation retreat, because that's what we're here for—to meditate, right? We didn't come here to have everything be the same as our daily life, probably. We came here to meditate. We came here to meditate for whatever reasons we say to ourselves, and we probably all have different language for it. But one is to purify the mind, to free our heart and mind from suffering. Because we're here in a meditation retreat, that's what we talk about, that's what we're focused on—moment-to-moment mindfulness. And I'm not trying to change that focus. It's a good focus, a useful focus. Moment-to-moment mindfulness really is the most direct way to allow for wisdom to arise.

But that's the thing: wisdom arises just by our moment-to-moment awareness and interest, not through our willpower and not through getting the right content, the right experience, the right meditation, the correct way of walking or sitting or breathing, the correct free-flowing attention, the correct choiceless awareness. We get so focused at times on *doing* the meditation, just doing it, doing it correctly, that—I don't know if you've noticed—we can be really, really sincere, working very carefully, trying not to strive, really doing everything as best we can. But at times it can start to feel very self-obsessed. It all becomes about *my* meditation. I mean, I spent a long time in that state. It comes and goes like anything. But there are times when we're really trying, and yet the focus all becomes on how's my meditation doing, getting my meditation better—and this noise is disturbing my meditation. I could feel it walking through the lunchroom today.

Walking around the lunchroom so carefully, protecting the cocoon of my meditation—whatever the heck is going on in my meditation. But there are times, and we all go in and out of this, when there's nothing to protect because there's no meditation. There's just this moment of awareness. Whatever's happening doesn't matter. And in that, there's openness. There's that possibility for insight to arise.

Now, as soon as I've said this, the mind goes, "Okay, openness... possibility..." You know, it's just what our minds do. But because insight arises spontaneously, in a moment of real purity of mind, of consciousness that's not clinging, not self-referencing or obsessed—we can't create that. You just can't. And I don't know why we can't believe that. It would spare us so much suffering. But we can't create it. We can't make insight happen out of willpower. We can't make wisdom arise.

So it's a tricky thing, because we can incline our mind towards the wisdom of what we've already understood or known. Taking impermanence again—there are ways we've all experienced impermanence. We can incline our mind in that direction, remembering, reminding ourselves: "Oh yeah, right, stuff is impermanent." But you can't sit down and say, "I will now have an insight into impermanence." You can't. I mean, you can sit down and do that, but you can't say, "I'm going to now notice the beginning and ending of every arising experience." Have you tried that today? I bet a lot of you have. I just knew when I heard him say that, I knew that's what the mind was going to do. And sometimes we can, and sometimes we can't—because guess what? It's not in our control.

So inclining the mind to the wisdom of "Yes, impermanence is a truth, and I have experienced that"—that's useful. But then we can't make the wisdom arise again. It's like the letting go: spontaneous, and staying really present.

Usually that's what we talk about as the supports for wisdom, for insight—the steadiness of mindfulness, this bare attention, non-judging, without concepts, the non-striving, the continuity, and the stability that grows from mindfulness and becomes samadhi. But that's not all we have to call on. It's not like it's that or nothing. When your mindfulness isn't steady, when you're feeling so obsessed with the meditation that it's just becoming one dismal, dark, new way to suffer—am I making that up, or have you experienced that? "Oh my God, life was bad enough, and now on top of it I have to be the bad meditator."

A good friend of mine was sitting for a few weeks over at the Forest Refuge last month when I was there, and he was talking to me about how we discuss the attitude of mind, just checking the attitude of mind—which is really what I'm talking about tonight. He said, really sincerely—and this is someone who's been sitting forever and who knows better—"So the attitude of mind... I mean, is there ever an attitude that isn't kilesa? Is there ever a moment, an attitude of mind, when you check it that isn't greed, hatred, or delusion? Because that's all I ever see."

Which, of course, isn't true. It wasn't even true for him. But sometimes we get so focused, zoomed into the kilesa aspect, the defilement, the torments of mind—usually when things aren't going the way we like them to, or they're unpleasant. And yes, they're the source of the suffering. I mean, it's good to notice them—I'm not saying otherwise. We've been talking about understanding them as freeing.

But there are times we get so fixated that even the noticing becomes problematic. Like when I mentioned that woman noticing the aversion—she noticed it with a mind that was not holding. The aversion becomes the object, but the mind that's noticing it is clear, pure, non-clinging. Aversion's not a problem. But there are other times when the mind that notices greed, aversion, self-judgment, or fear isn't quite totally pure and non-clinging. It's really colored, identified with that particular kilesa.

It's just seeing through it. And the more we really try to be moment-to-moment mindfulness, the more we really try to let go, it just seems like we're digging ourselves—it feels like at that moment—into a deeper and deeper hole. And you can't figure it out because technically you're doing everything you should be doing. You're doing the practice right. You're not just sloughing off. But everything's just kind of spiraling, spiraling.

Out of control is okay. Unpleasant is okay. But there are times when the more you seem to be mindful, the more it seems like you're feeding the unwholesome. Have you ever had that experience? It's usually the time when you come into an interview and I say, "Okay, you need to shift the focus of attention." And the person usually feels like they've failed. "I have to switch the focus of attention because I wasn't good enough to get through this."

How much the mind at that point is colored by—that moment of mind is colored by—self-judgment or wanting or attachment to a view, and we can't see it. Far from being bright and open and non-clinging with the possibility for insight or wisdom, it's just contracting on itself.

So at this point, it's really where we can learn that there are other ways to brighten, to bring the mind into readiness for insight.

I want to read this part of a sutta. I really love it. It just made me see that this is how the Buddha worked.

It says, "When the Buddha, the Blessed One, was staying in Rājagaha, at the Squirrel Sanctuary, at that time in Rājagaha there was a leper named Suppabuddha, a poor, miserable wretch of a person. And at that time, the Blessed One was sitting, surrounded

by a large assembly, teaching the Dhamma. Suppabuddha saw the large gathering of people from far off, and he thought, 'Without a doubt, someone there must be distributing food. So why don't I go over to that large group of people and get some food?'

"So he went over to the group of people, and then he saw the Blessed One sitting there teaching the Dhamma, and he realized, 'Oh, there's no one distributing food in this large gathering. That's Gotama, the contemplative, sitting surrounded by a large assembly teaching the Dhamma. Why don't I listen to the Dhamma since I'm here?' So he sat down.

"Now the Blessed One, comprehending the minds of the entire assembly with his awareness"—this is one of the special powers of a Buddha; there are often suttas where he does this—"asked himself, 'Now who here is capable of really understanding the Dhamma? Who here is really capable of waking up?'" Don't you wish we could do that and say the right thing? Sorry—we have to do it ourselves.

"And he saw Suppabuddha, the leper, sitting in the assembly. And on seeing him, the thought occurred to him"—and it's always like that; it's never "he thought," it's "the thought occurred to him," it just came through—"'This person here is capable of understanding the Dhamma.'

"So aiming specifically at Suppabuddha, the Buddha gave a step-by-step talk: a talk on generosity, on giving; a talk on virtue, on non-harming conduct; a talk on the heavens. He talked about the drawbacks, the suffering, and the corruption of sense desire, of sense passions, and the rewards, the happiness of renunciation. Then, when he saw that Suppabuddha the leper's mind was ready, malleable, free from hindrances, elated, and bright, then he gave the Dhamma talk peculiar to the awakened ones—that is, the Four Noble Truths."

So he very carefully talked about all these other qualities of our life, of our practice, that brighten the mind, that free the heart, that open us out from our self-absorbed tendencies. And then when he could tell the mind was ready—and of course, even that "poor, miserable wretch of a person," on hearing this: "Just as a clean cloth"—and this is how the mind is when it's not colored with kilesa—"just as a clean cloth, free of stains, would properly absorb a dye, in the same way, as Suppabuddha was sitting in that very seat, the dustless, stainless Dhamma eye arose within him: 'Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation.'" That's one of those little lines that shows he was a stream-enterer.

I really love that—that sense that it's not always the most helpful or appropriate thing to just hone in with all your energy on getting more precise, on being more mindful, on seeing more clearly, thinking that's going to make insight happen. It just doesn't always work. Yes, it's great, and it's our first line of refuge, no question. But sometimes we can call on lots of other qualities that open us out, that open the mind and heart into the spaciousness, the openness of non-clinging.

He was talking, and he said something that I thought was really interesting. He was describing how we tend to really try to see the object of our awareness more clearly much of the time. We think, "Oh, it's a cloud. I've got to see it clearly, see it clearly." We get so focused on the object. And the object can be mental too, remember. But we forget that really the path is about purifying the mind.

And so he said—this is what I thought was really interesting—that we can't force the insight. He said the quality of mind, of consciousness, the state of mind, is matched with the object that it can observe. Actually, he said the mind will perceive the object that it deserves. That was his language.

So basically he was saying that if the state of mind is filled with, identified with wanting, with dislike or aversion, with clinging to views, with "this is all about me," that quality of mind can try as hard as it wants. It's not going to see Nibbāna. It's only going to see through kilesa in a moment. And so as long as we're looking through what he calls "kilesa mind"—let's take a mind that's colored and we don't recognize the wanting, the striving, the dislike, the self-judging, the views; we don't recognize that—he said that all a mind like that can recognize is concepts. It sees the concept and takes the concept for reality. It's interesting.

So like that woman I talked about standing in pain, she would see through a mind with aversion that this unpleasant restlessness is my problem and I need to get rid of it to fix it, and that's just how it is. The Vipassanā mind, he calls it, can observe things just as they are. Vipassanā mind meaning connected, awake, free from clinging. Without bringing in concept, it can recognize things just as they are. It can see concept. It can see that concept: "Oh, I thought this is the only way to get rid of this pain, by walking out." But now I see: this is unpleasant experience, it feels like this. This is aversion in the mind, it's like that. Nothing changed but how it's observed. Kilesa mind, Vipassanā mind.

So that's when we talk about turning around and just noticing what's the attitude of mind. It is not always kilesa mind. A great deal of the time it's not. It's really, really helpful for us to also recognize that. Recognize when there is wisdom, clear seeing, just seeing things as they are without adding anything extra. Recognize when there's mettā,

when there's compassion, when there's sympathetic joy or equanimity. Recognize when there's gratitude, when there's generosity, when there's non-harming moral conduct, which can be of thought, not just of speech and body.

And all of these are also practices that we can call on consciously to brighten, to make our mind more malleable, more elated, more flexible, more open. When we feel that we're practicing as hard as we can and as sincerely as we can and we're just getting tighter and tighter and it's more and more about me, then maybe for a moment we could call on some of these other ways of brightening the mind, opening the mind and heart.

So I just want to mention a few of them. Each of them is a talk in itself, right? But recognizing, again, that the insight wisdom can arise in relationship to any experience. And the most mundane experience can be the source of really profound insight. So when we're getting upset, thinking our experience isn't subtle enough, and we're just sitting in fear, and then we get up and go eat, and it feels like our normal everyday consciousness, and we want something special—you know, we're looking out to object, to experience. Turn around and look at the attitude of mind. It's in the little things sometimes that something lets go. Like that woman standing there—and really a whole other way of being, of freedom, is perceived as possible.

There was someone else at the Forest Refuge, and she was having lots of insights. And it seemed like most of them, when she would talk about them, came when she was doing her vacuuming—yogi work meditation.

I love that because it really shows how we're just meeting everything as our path of waking up. We're not focusing only on some particular activity.

Sometimes people don't even know they're striving. You're really very committedly being continuous, not tense. And there could be such a tiny, tiny little bit of wanting or pushing that we really can't even notice it until it drops. Sometimes I know for me it would drop, like when you go into the toilet. Just something—you just quit trying to be so mindful, and insight can come. Or you're drinking your tea, or she's doing her vacuuming, or whatever. So never give up, but don't try too hard.

Nyoshul Khenpo, who was a very wonderful Dzogchen master, talks about bodhicitta, the awakened and noble mind and heart. But this is broader than that. He says the difference between the impure and the pure mind, the deluded mind and the enlightened mind, is mainly a difference of narrowness and openness. In our deluded state, our mind is extremely narrow. For example, we live alone, we rarely consider the infinity of sentient beings. The more constricted and narrow the mind, the more it

thinks only of itself, disregarding the well-being, happiness, and suffering of others. Conversely, the enlightened Buddha is one who considers the infinity of beings rather than being concerned only with his own ego and individuality. Thus the entire path from an ordinary being to Buddhahood is the gradual opening of mind. And that is precisely what we call bodhicitta—literally, to grow and develop that enlightened attitude. The concept of growth is used here for the passing from a completely narrow attitude focused principally on oneself to an open, loving heart whose scope instinctively encompasses the infinity of sentient beings.

So all these step-by-step ways that the Buddha mentioned in that sutta to Suppabuddha, and a couple I'm going to mention—they're all moving in that direction. From the narrow, constricted heart and mind centering around me, driven by greed and fear, toward the open heart and mind, the mind of non-clinging. This open mind will instinctively consider other beings' needs. But it's not that we have to be thinking that. It's just that when we're not centered here, the energy is available to respond to whatever presents itself to us, to respond to other beings. There's not this sense of me and other. It's just this.

And so, in support of insight, the supports for wisdom are all these different ways that the Buddha mentions, all working towards this brightening, lightening, opening the heart and mind. Mostly they're happy, joyful qualities. But it's not about cultivating them because we want to feel good. That's both the old motivation of how we used to do everything. And then sometimes we get so cautious, so fearful that we might fall back into wanting to feel good, that we get focused on the negative, like my friend. When we're really feeling the happiness of a generous thought that comes up, the mind goes, "You're just clinging to the pleasant"—and instead of the openness that we could really appreciate, it's like, "No, I have to do it right." But we don't recognize that.

So really, we can cultivate the wholesome. It's one of the four right efforts—recognizing wholesome states of mind that have arisen and helping them increase, and cultivating unarisen wholesome states of mind. That's a piece of wisdom. That's not, "Oh, I don't like what's happening and I want to feel good." That's not a wholesome state of mind.

I want to briefly mention bodhicitta, even though that wasn't in the sutta. Relative bodhicitta, being a noble or awakened heart-mind—Tibetans always talk about it as a motivation that we can consciously cultivate, if we choose, to feed our whole life, our whole practice. Very simply, you could say it is cultivating an altruistic attitude, cultivating an attitude just as Nyoshul Khenpo said: not only about me, but caring for the infinity of all beings. Okay, we can't go that far yet. But just that sense of "may my practice be

not for myself alone, but may my awakening be so that I can then be of service to help awaken all beings"—something like that. Of course, we don't start out feeling that. At first it might seem really very far away, but we can cultivate it.

In fact, Sogyal Rinpoche talks about it a lot. In one of his books he says it's really okay to practice bodhicitta. Because in the beginning, he says, this enlightened attitude has two aspects. This is relative bodhicitta—cultivating this sincere wish, and it's not sincere at first, maybe. That's what he means when he says we cultivate it: may I really awaken in order to help all beings awaken. So he says the enlightened attitude has two aspects. One is the urge in ourselves to purify our negativity, to come out of our suffering. And the second is the sincere desire to benefit all beings through our awakening—to awaken in order to bring others to awakening. So these two aspects.

It's really compassion for self and others. And always remember with this practice, and also with all the Brahma Viharas, that when we're connecting with all beings—with metta, with bodhicitta, with compassion—you are one of the all beings. Sometimes people practice for all beings and forget this one here. So compassion for all beings includes oneself.

In talking about cultivating this, at first it may seem too highfalutin. You know, "I'm just sitting here. It's all I can do to get through the sitting. And when I say, 'May I awaken to serve all beings,' it just sounds completely phony." So, as some teachers say, it's okay if it's artificial at first. It's not what we're used to. We haven't been thinking this way before, so we need to deliberately bring it up. We need to deliberately shift our heart and mind that way. So just try it. If you're inclined, just say it to yourself at the beginning of a sitting, at the end of a sitting, at the beginning of the day. And see what happens. Just see what happens.

So again, he said that if you cultivate the correct motivation in your own heart—just do that—it'll turn into bodhicitta all by itself. And I have found actually in my practice that's true. You may for many years be practicing for whatever your own particular motivation is: to free myself from suffering, to free yourself from a particular pattern that's causing too much suffering, to experience more love, to be compassionate, to awaken, whatever. And it's pretty normal that even when it's wholesome, it's pretty much about me in the beginning. I mean, that's all we know.

But slowly, slowly, those motivations begin to open up as the wisdom deepens, as the sense of self being so solid begins to be seen through. As impermanence becomes clearer, as there are more and more moments of insight, of seeing through that blind, unconscious holding to all the views—"it's all about me and I have to do this to make myself

happy"—they just naturally start to get more transparent. You don't have to try so hard to root it out. That's too much "me doing." It just gets more transparent. It does start to turn into bodhicitta by itself.

I have a friend I haven't seen for a few years, but he's one of—I think I could safely say—the more aversive people I know. And I know a lot of aversive people. Aversive, sincerely practicing, but very aversive. And with that, really most of it turned toward himself: very, very self-judgmental, feeling like he could never really practice or do anything good, really down on himself.

He was talking to me after a three-month course where he'd been just saying this bodhicitta intention to himself: "May I awaken to be of service, to awaken all beings." And then, wham, wham—"Who are you? How can you even say that? How can you even..." Just so much self-hatred would come up, and cynicism: "You don't feel anything. This just shows you're just..." All the stuff you can think of about yourself.

But he said he just kept on doing it. And something really started to change. I've had the same experience—not quite to the negative intensity of his—but where it stops being just words and you start to really feel something. Not "Oh, I'm so great, awakening for all beings," or that I'm awakened or anything, but the motivation starts to shift.

This is the way Tsoknyi Rinpoche describes the effect of that, which is really quite lovely—and he's funny too. He says it gives us courage. It opens the mind and heart. When it stops being all about me first, but really, somehow, I'm doing this for all beings—then there are times when you feel like, "I've had enough. I'm out of here. The hindrances are too strong." And something comes in: "Well, it's not just for you, you know." And it's not an ego thing, like "I'm going to serve all beings." It's more like, "Okay, just one more step. One more breath."

It expands the possibilities. It expands our mind and heart. The way Sayadaw U Tejaniya puts it is that it's the antidote to our chicken heart. It expands our chicken heart and gives us courage to be here for the next moment, for the next moment, for the next moment.

And it may sound like it's strengthening the sense of ego and self, but it's actually not. It's just the reverse. It's really quite lovely and very supportive—just to keep going. We don't have to know where it's going, or get into thinking, "Well, how is this going to help anybody?" That's just thinking. But it's this really deep motivation: May what I say and do awaken me to awaken all beings. Just try it, play with it, and see what effect it has.

Sometimes we can't access it, of course. All of these things I'm mentioning are skillful means. Sometimes we can access them, sometimes not. Sometimes we need to, sometimes not. So just seeing which ones are helpful.

I'll mention the others very briefly, and we'll talk about them more as the retreat goes on. All four Brahma Viharas: loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, equanimity. Compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity we'll go through in the evenings here. And loving-kindness was done in the first six weeks, and most of you are familiar with it.

These are also—even though the phrases we use are about me wishing for you, and it seems very me-and-other oriented—in the moment, in a mind moment when there's any of the four Brahma Viharas, it actually partakes of the vastness of the impersonal nature of the open heart and mind. When any of those four are present, there's not clinging in the heart and mind. It is not all about me. The distinctions, the separations break down. And so, again, with any of these four, it really opens, brightens, makes the mind and heart softer, more flexible. At the same time it's softer, it's also not so brittle—more flexible, not so easily shaken.

You know, when you're really feeling metta, really feeling it, and you walk through the dining room, you don't so much feel like you have to protect anything, do you? It's not like they're all out there waiting to ruin my meditation. It's just, here we are. It's a very different feeling.

Dana, or generosity—the first thing that the Buddha spoke about and really is pretty much the first thing he seemed to always teach when he started teaching, especially to lay people. We've talked about generosity and we'll talk about it again. The one point I really want to make about it tonight is something I didn't really understand until I'd spent a lot of time practicing in Thailand and also in Burma.

We hear about generosity as a way of creating merit, wholesome karma, wholesome results of doing good for people, of caring. But the big secret about it is that it's actually a source of incredible happiness in our own mind and heart when we're expressing generosity through thought or speech or action. The act of generosity, the intention of generosity in the mind, is a source of real brightness. It really brings a kind of happiness, a kind of elation to the mind that I hadn't really gotten before I'd seen it in action and experienced the effects going both ways.

I was a nun in Thailand for about a year, many years ago. At first I was really uncomfortable—and the same going to Burma—really uncomfortable with how generous people were to me in little things. I'm not saying everyone's perfect, everything's won-

derful, but there's a quality of generosity in the Dhamma culture, and often in many places in Burma especially, just the regular culture, of spontaneously offering time, gifts.

I was offered so much support when I was a nun in Thailand—my robes, my food everywhere. People would give me the best kuti or whatever they could have there for women to stay in. I was just treated so kindly, with such care. And my first response was, "No, not me, I'm not worth it," or "I really don't need it, I have enough money myself, I don't need to take from you." And you see, that just cuts it. There's this open generosity and wanting to push it back. But that's not the way.

What one really sees is that in the people offering, there's so much happiness. They're really happy to offer. And when I would open and receive, that happiness would affect me. Then it just becomes like a circle.

I notice at times when I was in various monasteries in Burma or Thailand—and other things go on too, this isn't the only thing—but over time I would find certain aspects of my heart getting brighter and brighter and happier. There was a lot of suffering, but also a brightness, a lightness that could open to the suffering. I just felt really inspired and uplifted. And some of this was from the generosity.

A friend of mine put it in a good way. She had come to a retreat in Burma a couple of years ago, and she hadn't been there much at all. She was telling me later that she didn't quite notice it at the beginning—it kind of crept up on her. She was an acupuncturist, and she came to a study retreat in Sagaing. Then I took her across the street to the hospital to meet some Burmese acupuncturists who were practicing there. She wasn't training them; she just met them. They were so kind to her and friendly. They took her into Mandalay and introduced her to a really famous acupuncturist from China. Then they took her to meet this wonderful old teacher, a Sayadaw. Then they took her to dinner. And then she met a Chinese teacher that she'd actually studied with in China who happened to be in Mandalay. It just kept happening—all this kind of magical, happy stuff kept unfolding. It's like that sometimes. Sometimes it's just the other way.

And then at the guest houses where she stayed, people went so out of their way to take care of her, to be kind. She said she started to notice that she was just getting happier and happier, feeling more and more open, wanting to offer and give and share. And not out of a sense of "I should." It starts that way because we're not used to it, but really a kind of happiness that opens the heart. The non-clinging is just the natural response, and then the heart is open, it's brighter, you start to see more, you start to experience more, you start to have some insights.

But for her, it was just this happiness. She came home and she saw how receiving the generosity—and the happiness of the person giving—had made her happy. She saw that when she came home, her friends who didn't really know anything about what she'd been doing or her meditation, they noticed something different in her. Being around her, they would start to feel happier, more open, more generous. And it can kind of roll like that.

Then she said also that back here, it started to kind of go away again. It didn't feel as supported. But that's just... I mean, there's a lot more to say about generosity, but I just wanted to bring out how it functions as a way of brightening and opening the heart and mind. Even just a generous thought—and here, please, please don't go around doing and saying things to other people here, like "I'm going to write everybody a note to be generous" or whatever—but just sometimes a generous thought will come up in your mind. What we can do is notice it. Notice that's an attitude of mine too. Appreciate it.

Sometimes when we're really down or kind of tight, you can actually reflect on, contemplate your past generosity. Not as an ego thing—"Aren't I something great?"—but just bring up, feel moments when you've thought or said or done something that's really from that open-hearted generosity. And you experience, again, the brightness, the uplifting of that, kind of like karmic result, vipāka. It's really quite helpful.

Similarly with sīla, with non-harming behavior, moral conduct. Certainly it's in order to protect other people and to protect ourselves. But the Buddha talked about the brightness of it as the bliss of blamelessness, freedom from remorse. This is a really happy state. This is a state that really allows us to relax, to open the heart and mind.

I imagine that most of you, in the time you've been here, have had some unwholesome thing, some stupid thing you did in the past arise in your consciousness, right? We all have done at least one or two stupid, unintelligent, harmful things. And it's painful when they come up. Even if it's met with wisdom, met with openness—that remorse is still painful. But it's healing if we don't pile on top of it guilt and present-moment aversion.

The freedom from remorse, the bliss of blamelessness, is a very profound aspect of non-clinging, of opening the heart and mind, of strengthening the mind, of support for wisdom, for insight.

I have to read this. It's a little aside, but I have to. From a news magazine, under a little column called "Only in America": A California perfume company has introduced the world's first biblically-themed fragrance called Virtue. From the perfumer: "It's based on years of scriptural research. It includes frankincense and myrrh in a blend of three-thousand-year-old scents."

Retailing at $80 for a bottle, Virtue will enable its wearer to smell like Christ and many of the saints, says CEO Rick Larimore. I won't tell you what I think they must have smelled like schlepping around in the desert all the time, but probably that's not what the perfume smells like.

Anyway, this is the main point. This is the CEO of the perfume company again: "Many individuals of high spiritual attainment give off a fragrance attributed to their virtue." So if you think that person near you is wearing a scented product, maybe you just don't recognize what you're actually perceiving.

On a serious note, the Buddha—and I'm not going to read this whole sutta, but it's one of these progressive teachings where this leads to that, leads to that—in this one he says: What is the purpose of skillful virtues? What is their reward? He says skillful virtues have freedom from remorse as their purpose, Ananda, and freedom from remorse as their reward.

And what's the purpose of freedom from remorse? It goes on and on. Freedom from remorse has joy as its purpose; joy is its reward. And it goes from joy to rapture, rapture to serenity, serenity to sukha, sukha to concentration, concentration to knowledge and vision of things as they actually are. Knowledge and vision of things as they actually are leads to disenchantment as its purpose and its reward. Disenchantment has dispassion as its purpose. And what's the purpose of dispassion? What's its reward? Dispassion has knowledge and vision of release as its purpose, knowledge and vision of release as its reward. In this way, Ananda, skillful virtues lead step by step to the consummation of arahatship—just to draw the links very clearly.

But there are times when we're nowhere able to be dispassionate, to see things clearly. But we can be calling on our sila, our skillful virtues. And no matter what we've done in the past, skillful virtues, sila, moral conduct can start right now.

Even Angulimala—you know this story, I'm not going to go into it—but the mass murderer who killed 999 people, when he met the Buddha, and the Buddha really helped him see through it, he became a bhikkhu. Even then, he began right then the cultivation of skillful virtue.

There's an interesting little story in the sutta about him. After he became a monk, and he was very sincere—he'd reached first stage anyway—he went into a village for alms and saw a woman giving birth and in a lot of pain and suffering, and he was really touched. He came back to the Buddha and said, "Ah, so much suffering. I wish I could help."

So the Buddha says—this was a common blessing then—"Go and say to her: 'Sister, since I was born, I do not recall intentionally killing a living being. Through this truth, may there be well-being for you and your child.'"

He goes, "Buddha? Wouldn't that be a lie? I mean, I've intentionally killed many living beings."

The Buddha says, "Okay. Then go and say: 'Sister, since I was born in the noble birth, since I was born in the Dhamma, I do not recall intentionally killing a living being. Through this truth, may there be well-being for you and the child.'"

And it says, and there was.

Just taking a stand on that profound truth: skillful virtues begin now. Non-harming speech, non-harming thoughts, non-harming action. And in calling on them, we can actually contemplate, reflect on, call up times of skillful virtue as a way to brighten, to open the contracted heart and mind, to support faith and trust.

Again, this is something many times we don't do so much in the West, but it really is a source of wholesome happiness sometimes. You might have to get over a little feeling of, "Ugh, this is so egocentric." That's aversion. But when you're purely calling up wholesome things you've done and those memories come, don't shy away or be afraid to look. Feel the wholesomeness. Feel the brightness.

And in the one minute left, the last thing I want to mention is gratitude. One time, Sayadaw U Pandita was giving a talk here, and I didn't have notes so I can't remember all of it, but he talked about five kinds of rare beings, rare people.

One of them was a Buddha, so that's pretty rare. But one was someone who really feels and expresses gratitude.

In terms of opening oneself to gratitude—this is something I actually often practice both on and off retreat. When my mind and heart feel contracted and narrow, just focused on my little self or on what's wrong, or overwhelmed with suffering, mine or another's, I consciously call on gratitude. Whether it's gratitude to the Buddha, to your

teachers, to our circumstances, gratitude for human birth, or it can just be gratitude for little things. It still brings this openness, this inspiration of mind, this purity of mind stream.

Sometimes on retreat, I remember getting in bed at night, one of those nights when you think, thank God, tomorrow is a new day. Hopefully things change and we'll wake up and it'll all be okay again. This state will be gone. And I would just start bringing in some gratitude. I'm grateful for—and I might start really mundane. Again, like with bodhicitta, not feeling anything yet. I'm grateful to have a bed to sleep in. I'm grateful to have enough warmth. I'm grateful I had enough to eat today. I'm grateful for the dharma. And just start, and sometimes I'd have to think of things, but really pretty soon, unless it's a particularly contracted state, some little glimmer of actual gratitude would come, and then things would just start pouring—more than I could even think of, things that surprised me.

It's not so much about the content. It's just about touching again that attitude, that wholesome attitude of heart and mind, really supporting this orientation.

It's not so much about feeling good. It really isn't. Feeling good comes along with these things as a nice side benefit. But it's really about calling on these different ways to enlighten, to support the purity of consciousness, to help support the mind of non-clinging. Here and now as the means to the end of awakening. But it's only in this moment, experienced fully at times in this moment, here and now. Something we can all be really grateful for.

So let's just sit quietly for a minute.

I wanted to share this bodhicitta prayer from the Twelfth Gyalwang Drukchen Rinpoche. I just really like it:

I call on you, my teachers, regard me with compassion.
I sincerely wish to receive your blessings.
Please regard your child's longing desire.
Please bless me with the resolve to attain realization.
Please bless me to have a steady and smooth mind
so that for this life and those to follow
as a true practitioner whose heart and mind are in accord
the special intention to help others is spontaneously present.
May I be able to benefit measureless beings.

CHAPTER 36

The Seven Factors of Enlightenment

Sally Armstrong · 57 min

> *In this dharma talk from the 2007 three-month retreat at IMS, Sally Armstrong offers a comprehensive exploration of the seven factors of enlightenment (satta bojjhaṅga)—the essential qualities the Buddha identified as necessary for awakening. She addresses a common tendency in practice to focus primarily on what's difficult, encouraging practitioners to also recognize the wholesome states being cultivated.*
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> *Armstrong presents these factors as a practical map rather than distant ideals: mindfulness (sati) as the balancing factor; the three arousing factors of investigation (dhammavicaya), energy (vīriya), and rapture (pīti); and the three calming factors of tranquility (passaddhi), concentration (samādhi), and equanimity (upekkhā). Drawing from her own retreat experiences, she shares personal insights about each factor, describing investigation as "full-body listening" and energy as "resolve." She emphasizes that these qualities are often already present in simple mindfulness but go unrecognized.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance on balancing these factors and finding "the thread of wholesome in the unwholesome"—transforming sleepiness into calm, restlessness into energy, and doubt into investigation. Armstrong concludes with the Buddha's teaching from the Aṅguttara Nikāya affirming that all who find freedom do so through abandoning the hindrances, establishing mindfulness, and developing these seven factors as they actually are.*

Let's begin this evening by retaking the refuges and precepts, so it's a chance for all of us to recommit to that practice of sīla.

I'm very aware that we spend a lot of time talking about what's difficult in our practice—difficult states of mind and heart, difficult experiences of the body, the hindrances, forms of pain or suffering. But I always feel when I give a talk like that, at least I know everyone can relate. There's something about sharing those experiences that we kind of bond on that level.

But it can feel sometimes like that's the lens through which we look at our experience, that we're on pain patrol, as one person called it, or even hindrance patrol, and the antenna, the radar are out just for whatever's difficult. How many times have you noted "unpleasant" so far on this retreat?

Someone on another retreat came in and spoke about this, and I could relate because I'm also a Monty Python fan. If you know the spam skit, she said it's like, you know, this dish is dukkha, dukkha, and more dukkha. And you say, well, isn't there a dish without any dukkha? Oh, there's this experience—it only has a little bit of dukkha in it. Or it's dukkha, dukkha, dukkha, lunch, nap, more dukkha. That can seem like what a day is like sometimes.

But it's really important to both recognize suffering and be able to bring it into our practice and accept it. This is a rich and deep part of our practice here. But just as important is to notice the wholesome states of mind, the beautiful qualities of heart that we are also developing here. Even though the Buddha often talked about freedom, he always talked about it in relationship to the cultivation of these beautiful qualities of heart.

As Ajahn Sumedho would say, you have to know the difficult to know what's opposite. You have to know anger to know non-anger. You have to know agitation to know what non-agitation is like. And it's really like you have to know dukkha to know sukha. Sukha is the Pali word for happiness. So that's a lot of what our practice is about. As we open to what's difficult, it actually can reveal to us the possibility of great happiness and great freedom.

What I want to talk to you about tonight is this beautiful list that the Buddha considered essential in our practice of wholesome factors called the seven factors of enlightenment—these seven qualities of mind or heart that actually are necessary to develop as we journey on this path towards greater and greater freedom.

I can always remember when I would hear this talk given, it seemed like some pie-in-the-sky kind of fantasy about what practice could be like, because I was on the dukkha side of things. It was dukkha or boredom, kind of moving between those two. When people would talk about these beautiful and sublime states, I just put it on hold and thought, well, maybe sometime in the future, not now.

But as I've practiced more and also explored this list more, I've really seen the possibility—and perhaps what I was missing when I was having that relationship to it—of noticing what's actually here and the beauty in that. So often because we're focused on what's difficult, we skim over what's beautiful or what's working in our practice and don't give it full value. We don't actually acknowledge that it's there.

These experiences may be subtle in the beginning, but that's why we need to bring our mindfulness to them and train ourselves to notice them, because they are there in our practice. It's just a question of really being willing to acknowledge them. And in

that acknowledgment, we see that it's not so distant a set of experiences. Any time we actually work with our experience directly, work with a difficulty or a hindrance, any time we open to something, we are cultivating these beautiful factors of mind known as the seven factors of enlightenment. Just by being mindful, the purification of that, the quality of attention that we bring to our experience when we're mindful of it is actually cultivating these factors. So hopefully you'll see that they're not so separate from your current experience.

As you know, the Buddha loved to make lists. It seemed to be his penchant. Everything is listed and ordered and numbered. There can be a sense of constriction in that. But actually, what I find is that knowing these lists and opening to them brings a sense of possibility. Maps are really helpful. If we don't know what the terrain is, if we haven't traveled in a certain direction ourselves, to have someone lay out a map for us really provides a sense of guidance and possibility.

Big pieces of paper, usually, that you'd unfold, and many hundreds of miles might be depicted on these maps.

But the new way of getting maps or directions is over the internet or GPS. And it's a very different way of looking at a map, especially the internet kind of way. How do I get from here to there? You get on Yahoo Maps and you get this printed-out list of directions. And it sounds so authoritative. You think you can put your trust in it: go 0.8 miles, turn left at so-and-so, go one and three-quarter miles, turn right at this place. It seems really trustworthy. It's printed, and you got it from the internet.

But how many of us have done that and been tripped up? We put our faith in these maps, and the trouble with those linear kind of maps is that if one piece of information is wrong, or if you miss a turn, then you're completely lost because you have no context for where you are.

I had this experience myself not so long ago. I had to lead a daylong in Sacramento, which is about a two-hour drive from where we live. It started at nine, so I had to leave home at six-thirty to get there in time. The organizer said, "I'll send you directions, get you right to the door." So I followed them, and all was very well and good until it said, "Take the exit for 116 and then head east." Driving along, driving along, none of the exits mentioned 116. It wasn't in any of the references that I saw. After a while, you keep going and you start getting into countryside again. This isn't working. I had to pull off. Luckily, I had a real map and could find myself on it and realize that there was 116 there—but it's also West Street, and it's also the road that leads to such-and-such a town. With those extra pieces of information, I could find it. But just with that linear guidance, it's not possible.

It's even the same with GPS. We're getting so used to that kind of map-making, but it's this little square of information. You can move it around, but it's still just a little square. What they say about maps is that they provide us what they call a God's-eye view, where you can really see the whole terrain, locate yourself in it, and see possibilities, see alternatives, see things that you might want to try out—instead of being limited to a certain route that someone else has determined for you.

This is why maps that are very spacious, very broad in their application, are helpful for us in our practice. And of course, knowing a map just intellectually is theoretical. It's only when we actually tread the path ourselves and have those direct experiences that it becomes alive for us, that we can really say we know the map. It's like when you're driving: you can go a route many times as a passenger and not know it at all. It's when you're driving, when you are the person having the experience, that the knowledge actually deepens.

I know we're always looking for the right way in our practice. So many of the questions are: Is this the right way to do it? What should I do in this situation? Or we're looking for the quickest way. We don't say that, but that's really what's underneath those questions. I know there's a better way—you just haven't told us yet what that is. You're letting us fumble around in the dark.

Well, it's because it only works if you discover it for yourself. We give you the map. We say, look, there are these kinds of experiences, these ways of relating, these different tools that we can offer to you. But each one of us has to find our own way on this map.

Maps are really helpful when they're used skillfully and when we actually put them into practice, when we follow them and work with them. With this teaching on the seven factors, it's very much that way—for you to be able to say, when you have an experience, "Oh, that's what that is. That's calm. That's interest." Or to know for yourself, "Perhaps this is a little lacking in my practice. I need to go a little more in this direction." Out of skillfulness, out of wisdom—this is what these kind of maps can do. They can invite us to incline the mind in certain directions.

And when it's done skillfully, this gentle accepting intention of inclining the mind towards something can be really helpful, really wholesome.

A few years ago, I did a retreat here at IMS, about this time of year, where my intention was to do a period of concentration practice—just very simple ānāpāna breath meditation for concentration—and then to open up to vipassanā practice, to mindfulness practice. I did my two weeks, and it was very sweet; the concentration developed quite well. It got very calm and focused and steady, absorbed in the practice.

And then came the time that I'd committed to when I would change to vipassanā. I noticed as that time got closer a great deal of reluctance to do that, because if you've done any concentration practice, there's a feeling of cocooning that can come. As you get absorbed into the object, there's a simplicity to it and a sweetness to it that's quite beguiling. It's very comforting and very reassuring. The thought of opening up and including something else—it was like, oh, do I want to even do that?

As I sat down for that sitting, because you have to just shift, you have to move from that sense of focus into openness, I could feel the reluctance and a kind of wondering: what's out there? I've been so secluded with the breath. There was a little bit of apprehension. But as I opened up, I can still so distinctly remember the room I was sitting in and the experiences that happened. The mind, in letting go of its fairly one-pointed focus and including all of the objects of my experience, felt very light. One of the things that concentration does is develop a light and malleable mind, and I could really feel that because I was very present and awake and alert.

As I looked at my experience and was almost delighting in it because of the contrast to what I was expecting, the thought that came to mind was: oh, some of the seven factors are here. It wasn't a thought that I had had much before in my practice. Usually it was "here's suffering" and "well, here's some acceptance." But to actually say, look, what's happening? I could go through the list and just notice the impact of each of the factors and feel that they were somewhat in balance. I'm not claiming anything about that—it was a very simple, direct experience—but it was a pointer to me of what was possible as these factors might deepen and be brought more into balance. On that retreat, one of the things I did was really explore for myself the seven factors and how I noticed their impact in my practice. This talk came very much out of that retreat.

So there are seven factors, and in the wise way of the Buddha, there are three arousing factors and three calming factors. Mindfulness is the balancing factor that actually begins the list and suffuses the whole of all the other factors. It's so necessary. The arousing factors are investigation, energy, and rapture. I'll go into all of them in more detail. The calming factors are tranquility, concentration, and equanimity.

There's a way in which the list is somewhat linear. It's never that clearly so, but you can see a kind of developmental nature to the list. But it's not so helpful to think, well, today I'll work on this and tomorrow I'll work on that. They're much more mysterious than that. And of course, it's even more holographic, where each one supports and is supported by the other factors. Picture a circle, holographic, with lines going in and out between all of them. There are many feedback loops. I think it's more helpful to see it that way than as a direct one-way street, because then we can get confused or lost. To really see them as a whole is what matters.

It begins with mindfulness—sati is the Pāli word. Of course, we've spoken a lot about that. That's all we ever really speak about: mindfulness and all the different things that we can be mindful of. Mindfulness is just this simple act of noticing what's happening, but knowing that we're noticing what's happening. It's that knowing that is what makes it mindfulness.

Christina Feldman, in her book on simplicity, has this really nice, very complete description of mindfulness. She says: "Mindfulness is not only a technique or a practice, but is concerned with the quality of wakeful presence and the willingness to learn that we bring to each moment in our lives. It is saturated with sensitivity and curiosity, with the willingness to make peace with all moments and all things, and the deep wish to be free wherever we are. Mindfulness illuminates all things and all activities."

You can see from that all of the different qualities that mindfulness cultivates, and it really becomes like our currency. We're not so concerned with the NASDAQ or the Dow, but with the MQ—the mindfulness quotient. You might have noticed, if you go into your interviews and describe some experience, the meditation teacher's stock answer is, well, did you notice that? Were you mindful of it? This is what the invitation always is: can we actually come into direct contact with our experience and know it for what it is?

As we explore this quality of mindfulness for ourselves, as we begin to experience it more continuously, we can see all the layers that are present in it. Acceptance, interest, equanimity, calm—all of these things can be present in mindfulness.

It can include and accept anything. The Buddha said that there is no other factor as powerful for the cultivation of wholesome states of mind and the diminishing of unwholesome ones as mindfulness. Just mindfulness is so powerful in that way.

But of course, we often have a sense that it's only good mindfulness, or our practice is only going well, when it's pleasant—when we're experiencing things that feel right to us in some way or another. And when we're struggling with something, this is bad practice. This is not where happiness or mindfulness lies.

Again, to turn to that great teacher and philosopher, Calvin and Hobbes. There's a cartoon where they're climbing a tree together, and Calvin is saying, "I suppose the secret to happiness is learning to appreciate the moment. I, for example, take great pleasure in being right here, right now, doing what we're doing." And Hobbes says, "Of course, you're supposed to be at school." But Calvin says, "I couldn't appreciate those moments."

So when it's difficult, we don't remember to bring our mindfulness in. We just struggle and get caught. Mindfulness really needs to be brought into every aspect of our experience. As U Tejaniya says, if you're aware, just be glad that you're aware. That is the right attitude. So when you are confronted by a defilement and are aware of it, be glad that you are aware of the defilement, even if it does not seem to dissolve. As long as you are aware of the defilement, you are doing well. Basically, you're cultivating your mindfulness.

But it's important not to elevate mindfulness to this rarefied experience of clarity and purity that we only touch every now and then, or to make it so burdensome—"I've got to be mindful, I should be more mindful." I think it's really more helpful to reframe it: "Oh, now I get to be mindful. Now there's this possibility, this invitation to know my experience more deeply, more truly."

It's really helpful to find a way to practice your mindfulness that's very easeful, that's very simple, that's grounded in the body, grounded in your awareness, and just knows enough. The refrain in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta on the foundations of mindfulness that we've referred to a number of times says again and again, "mindful to the extent necessary." And I love that. It's not any great depth. It's just to the extent necessary to know what we need to know.

Mindfulness as a factor, as we get more and more connected with our experience, leads naturally to the next factor, which is investigation or interest. Dhamma vicaya is the Pāli, and that's the I in that acronym RAIN that I talked about a while ago. A few of you have said that was helpful: Recognition, Acceptance, Interest or Investigation, and Non-identification.

Joseph, the other night, spoke about the difference between relaxed and casual practice, or relaxed and casual mindfulness. And I really think that the difference between those two is the cultivation of these next two factors of interest and energy. This is what makes the difference between practice and really being there, being present.

This factor of interest was actually the one that I always felt I was weakest in. I could get relatively concentrated, fairly calm, could have some energy arise out of practice, but I never felt I was quite there. That question I've heard a few of you ask—"I'm not getting enough insights. Where are the insights coming?"—I would have that feeling too.

There can be a way in our practice, or a way we sometimes understand mindfulness, that cultivates passivity, a kind of sense that we just sit back and watch the show. And yes, that is a helpful way to view practice, but it's not the only way. We need to really find what the balance of engagement is in our practice.

But interest or investigation also doesn't mean that we carry the dissecting tools around in our pocketbook and every time get out the scalpel and start to cut away at experience, trying deliberately to go through layers and layers to find out what's there, to get to the bottom of this, to keep discovering and rooting out whatever's below.

So it's really finding this balance. For me, dhamma vicaya has a non-interfering quality. It doesn't change the experience. It just gets closer to it, to see it as it is. I've heard Joseph refer to it as interested attention, which I think is helpful.

On this retreat that I mentioned, as I reflected on this quality and what would work for me as an invitation to incline the mind in this direction, the word that actually came for me—I hadn't heard people use it, and it's only helpful for me, it may not work for you—was listening. But it wasn't listening with the ears. It was kind of like this full-body listening.

And what I related it to was what you might do if you're out in nature. I love to be in nature—I'm a bird watcher and an animal lover, often out there looking for things or interested in what's there. If someone says "listen," yes, you listen with the ears, but there's also a way your whole body kind of attunes. All the senses are awake in that moment, and there's just an openness to experience.

So that's what I would feel like when this quality was alive. It's just sort of like the body listening to the body, the mind listening to the mind. There was that sense of connecting or presence.

I can remember on that retreat doing walking meditation in the fall—going out there with the leaves crunching underfoot, that aliveness that can come from this kind of temperature when it's a little brisk, the wind blowing, smells in the air. That level of interest, that aliveness in experience—for me, that is dhammavicaya. But it's not an investigation that requires thought or thinking about. As I said, it's just this getting closer

to experience, getting more directly in contact with what is, being willing to stay with our experience so we can see what happens—perhaps see its changing nature, see its qualities more closely.

This willingness to be there on an ongoing basis is what cultivates the wisdom of clear seeing, because we're there, we're interested, we're connected. We're seeing without a lot of projections.

Ajahn Chah, the Thai forest meditation master, said this about the seven factors and particularly about investigation:

"If we have studied about the seven factors of enlightenment, then we'll know what the books say, but we won't have seen the real factors of enlightenment. The real factors of enlightenment arise in the mind. Thus the Buddha came to give us all the various teachings. All the enlightened ones have taught the way out of suffering, and their recorded teachings we call the theoretical teachings. This theory originally comes from practice, but it has become merely book learning or words.

"The real factors of enlightenment have disappeared because we don't know them within ourselves. We don't see them within our own minds. If they arise, they arise out of practice. If they arise out of practice, they are factors leading to enlightenment of the Dhamma, and we can use their arising as an indication that our practice is correct. If we are not practicing rightly, such things will not appear.

"If we practice in the right way, then we can see the Dhamma. So we say to keep on practicing, feeling your way gradually and continually investigating. Don't think that what you are looking for can be found anywhere other than right here.

"This kind of understanding which comes from practice leads to surrender or giving up. Until there is complete surrender, we persevere, we persist in our contemplation. If desires or anger and dislike arise in our mind, we aren't indifferent to them. We don't just leave them, but rather take them and investigate to see how and from where they arise. If such moods are already in our mind, then we contemplate and see how they work against us. We see them clearly and understand the difficulties which we cause ourselves by believing and following them. This kind of understanding is not found anywhere other than our own pure mind."

So it's just this willingness to contact our experience, whatever it might be, and be interested in it. And then all of that wisdom can arise out of that.

As we become interested in what's happening for us, the next factor is being cultivated, and that's the factor of energy, or viriya. Joseph spoke about this a lot the other night, so I won't go too much into it. But it is simply the effort to be aware. That's all it means—the effort we need to bring to our practice.

Of course, we need energy in practice: just the energy to get up in the morning, to stay present, to stay up at night, to sit, to walk. And you can probably remember what your energy was like at the beginning of the retreat, whenever that was for you—that feeling of sluggishness, of not connecting. Hopefully now, whether you've been here eight weeks or two weeks, you can feel how that energy has shifted. Perhaps you have more energy for practice, to get up a little early or stay up a little later. We really start to look at that quality of energy in its bigger picture—the energy of the day, of sitting and walking—but also moment to moment.

We tend to think of energy like a battery that's just going to run down. The more we use it, if we're not recharging it, it's running down. But it's actually the opposite in practice. We find that the more energy we put in, it actually recharges us, allowing us to get more interest, more connection.

For me, an analogy is always going swimming. I love to swim—in the ocean, in rivers, in lakes, wherever it is. But nearly always when you swim, the water is cold. There's that first moment where you put your foot in and you go, "Oh no, why would I want to do this?" The body just kind of recoils and contracts. But you keep going, a little bit deeper, and at the knees it's not so bad. Then it starts to get more sensitive as it goes up. And my mind is always going, "Don't do it. It's not worth it. Don't go in. It's too cold."

I just have to bring to mind all of the times—maybe even yesterday—that I swam, and when I did it, I really enjoyed it. But nearly every time, unless you just do that diving in, which is much better in the end, the mind just doesn't want to go there.

It doesn't want to engage in that activity. And you dive in, and you come up, and you think, what was I thinking? This is great. I love it! And you swim up and down and stay in. But every time there's that resistance, that conditioned habit saying it's not going to work this time—if I do it, I'm going to be cold or tired or whatever is going to happen.

So we really have to check in with this attitude of mind. On this retreat, when I felt into what energy or virya was for me, the word I came up with was "resolve." And I liked it because sometimes if we think of energy, there's a real doing quality to it—like I've got to do more, or I'm not doing enough, getting kind of amped up about this. But

resolve for me has that same quality I was speaking about before, of really being steady and willing to meet moment after moment what was happening for me. There was a sturdiness to it and a patience to it that seemed skillful.

So that's the word that has worked for me—to stay sitting through a difficult time or some upheaval in the practice, to keep coming back to the whole even when you feel challenged by what's going on. This requires resolve. It's really, again, a sense of commitment.

As we put in this extended effort over time, as we bring this sense of resolve to our practice, it does recharge the batteries. We're not losing energy. We're actually gaining energy, gaining momentum. And out of this momentum, often the next factor can be developed. That's the factor of rapture, or piti.

We often commonly translate it as rapture, though I think it's a little misleading—it sounds so delightful. I'll talk a little more about it, but there's a whole range of experiences that we can call piti. Other definitions are joyful interest or zestful interest, intense interest. It has a connotation of bliss or delight. It is a mental factor, but it often has strong resonance in the body. The body can resonate to this quality in the mind. But it always arises from this commitment to our practice, where we become so interested in the object of our attention—whether it's very one-pointed or it's more the openness of meditation—that out of the interest and the energy, we just delight in what we're paying attention to. There's really a sense that the attention, the mind, doesn't want to be anywhere else, is really happy to be paying attention to what we're paying attention to.

This is a traditional definition of piti from the Visuddhimagga, this very thick book of commentaries on practice called "The Path of Purification": Traditionally, rapture is graded into five categories—minor rapture, momentary rapture, showering rapture, uplifting rapture, and pervading rapture. Minor rapture is generally the first to appear in the progressive development of meditation; it is capable of causing the hairs of the body to rise. Momentary rapture, which is like lightning, comes next but cannot be sustained for very long. Showering rapture runs through the body in waves, producing a thrill but without leaving a lasting impact. Uplifting rapture, which can cause levitation, is more sustained but still tends to disturb concentration. All-pervading rapture is said to suffuse the whole body so that it becomes like a full bladder or like a mountain cavern inundated with a mighty flood of water.

Whenever we read this, everyone goes, "Oh, that's what I want—rapture! When is rapture? Where am I on this map? When is rapture going to happen?" Well, you never know, but it does arise out of that sense of being interested, being really connected to the meditation.

But it's not always pleasant. We translate it sometimes as bliss, but rapture can be very energetic. It can involve all sorts of distortions of experience—swellings and pushings and pullings. All of these kinds of things can be rapture, not always, but if it arises out of this concentrated, interested mind, it can be the experience of rapture. And often it can get so strong and actually disturbing to our practice, the energy moving through, that we just actually wish rapture to die down a little, to come into balance.

So there's often this arc in the practice of an opening to rapture, an interest, and at first it's exciting—something's going on—and after a while it's, "Okay, enough already with the rapture."

Where are we going from here? It can actually wear us down. There needs to be a balancing. And it's actually at this time that the shift can happen into the more calming factors.

It's interesting to me that such an energetic factor as rapture can actually lead to the next factor of tranquility. But what I think happens is that as the mind becomes absorbed into the object, thoughts naturally diminish and the hindrances recede a little. Once the energy calms down, once we become more acclimatized to that type of practice, peace arises. Calm or tranquility can come.

So it's an interesting shift. And it's not, as I say, that this is always linear—that rapture will happen and then calm. But I can really understand how there can be this progression. For all of us on this map, as I said, it's not a one-way street. We're moving around and in and out of these qualities all the time. But there can just be a tendency in this direction.

This state of calm or tranquility is one that many of us aren't used to. We're used to being busy, being engaged, being interested—or being nervous, or being worried. And then calm comes, and it's like, what is this? I remember sitting in this hall and hearing Michelle McDonald give this talk on the factors of enlightenment. She's someone that has a lot of interesting stuff in her practice—really, always things going on. And she said the first time she experienced calm, her note was, "Calm?" Kind of with a question mark on it. Like, what is this? I don't know this.

What can also happen is we confuse it with boredom or nothing happening. We go through all this agitation and a lot of aversion and desire and fantasies, and then it all can calm down a little bit, and we look around and think, hmm, nothing happening. This is boring. We might even wish back for our old disturbances rather than just sitting there in this neutrality.

It's really important at this point to notice the wholesome factor of calm if it's present and to appreciate it. Not to judge your practice—thinking there should be something else happening, that you need to get a little more engaged and dig something up. Please, appreciate calm. It can become such a refuge for us once we know it as a mind state, as an experience. We can start to see how with just a few breaths, with the way we're really connected, we can invite this steadiness of mind in, this peace of mind in. Really helpful for us to know and experience.

On another retreat I did here, we began just after September 11th, 2001. This retreat went on as it did every year, and I was booked to go on the first half. So it was quite an interesting time to come on retreat, with all of that emotion and fear and anxiety, anger and sorrow that that time brought up in all of us. And then to come to this refuge of IMS, where there was no news to turn off—going from twenty-four-seven news to no news. The only thing I remember thinking was, well, the planes are still flying, things must be going okay out in the world. But coming in here and just turning off from that barrage of news and speculation and worry and fear—it was such a relief.

I remember going to my teachers and saying, "It's so great. My mind has just gotten so calm and quiet." It was like, phew. And I just saw this six weeks of calm and quiet just deepening and deepening, how wonderful that would be. Of course, it didn't happen. I think the mind was just so happy to have this refuge that it was easily able to go to that sense of calm. Of course, I then came up with all sorts of other things to think about and worry about. But still, I got to so appreciate calm and peace, having come out of such an agitated time.

Calm is the quality, the tranquility, that can lead to the next factor of concentration, or samādhi. And again, concentration is the word we usually use, but it's not a great translation. Better words might be unification of mind, or non-distractedness, or wholeness of mind—because concentration has a sense of fixedness or even rigidity, a narrowness of focus. A concentrated mind doesn't necessarily have those qualities. It can be very open, very light, very spacious, but undisturbed, undistracted, really fully in its experience.

We build this concentration not by trying hard, not by focusing in some intense way, but just by successive moments of mindfulness. Gradually this quality can accumulate in us.

And it's a powerful state of mind. The Buddha said never underestimate the power of a concentrated mind. A concentrated mind becomes, as they say, malleable, wieldy. It's able to turn with wisdom to cultivate these wholesome qualities, and it allows us to stay steady with our experience, to see things clearly as they are. And it invites the next factor, is supported by the next factor, and supports the next factor of equanimity, or *upekkhā*.

This is also one of the Brahma Viharas, so we'll be practicing it in the last weeks of the retreat. Now this factor of equanimity is one that's often misunderstood, confused with detachment—a distancing of ourselves from experience, disinterested in some negative kind of way. This is not the true experience of equanimity. Shaila spoke about it beautifully this morning, about this connected experience that is in balance, that is able to open to the whole range of our experience without being shaken by it, without being sent off balance. If equanimity is too disengaged, it's not true equanimity. We have to be in contact with our experience to really be equanimous, to really know what's happening and be involved.

I've done some periods of intensive equanimity practice, and it was really interesting to explore this quality—to feel when I would move forward into too much doing or too much wanting to fix or change things, and then move back into a kind of aloof distance. Finding that balance. There is a coolness to equanimity, but it's not apathetic or disengaged. It's connected to experience.

Again, on that retreat during September 11th, I was interviewing with Joseph, my teacher, and talking about how a lot of the time the mind was very balanced and calm, but I would feel, right out there very close by, all of the thoughts of 9/11 and the fear of not knowing what was going on. And he very wisely said, "Nothing should be held outside of the practice. Everything needs to be included." He advised me to do a practice where, in a quiet sitting, I would actually deliberately bring to mind or open to those thoughts. It was such an interesting experience to bring those challenging, distressing thoughts into a mind that was in balance, and to see how I could hold them. I could still feel all of the feelings, but there was a sense of capacity, a sense of being able to meet them and not be thrown off balance—or to see that I would get a little off balance, but the inclination of the mind was to come back into balance through the equanimity.

So anytime we accept something just as it is, open to it fully, this is equanimity. Again, not to make it too elevated, as though equanimity means we're just floating above everything. As our teacher John says, just to be able to say "it's like this"—this experience is like this—that's equanimity enough for us to deepen in our practice. And so this quality of equanimity is often there. It's often there in just simple mindfulness, when we're knowing what's happening just as it is. Part of this practice is to tease out these threads and see when these factors are present.

So our whole development becomes feeding the factors of enlightenment and starving the hindrances. Because any time we recognize, accept, and work with a hindrance, we are automatically feeding the factors of enlightenment. And any time we support the factors, acknowledge the factors, we're weakening the tendencies of the hindrances. It really is this balancing.

Another thing that Joseph said to me that was helpful was finding the thread of wholesome in the unwholesome. Take the hindrances, for example. In sleepiness, the thread of the wholesome is calm. If we can find that thread and enliven it, we can go from sleepiness to calm—a very wholesome state, one of the factors. The same with anger: to find the wisdom or the energy of anger and let that diminish the hindrance while arousing the wisdom factor. With restlessness, again, energy—you can take out that thread of energy from the restlessness and invite interest into the practice. And in doubt, the hindrance of doubt, the thread of wholesomeness, of skillfulness, is inquiry or investigation—the willingness to look at what's actually happening.

So we discover these tools, we discover these maps, these paths and ways of practicing where we can see what feeds the factors and diminishes the hindrances. This is the map that we create for ourselves. We get the basic bare bones from our reading, from teachings, from knowing the Dhamma, but we create the map for ourselves that knows this path, this terrain, knows what works for us, knows and trusts that we have the skillful tools. We know that dwelling on irritation and ill will will just exacerbate that feeling. We know that letting go of views and opinions will bring about equanimity and calm. We see this directly for ourselves—what works and what gets in the way.

And so we learn to balance these factors. Of course, we can't will them. It's not a situation where we can say, "I want more of this and less of that." But noticing what's present, inclining the mind, being willing to find that thread of skillfulness or wholesomeness in our experience, and through that very attention allowing those beautiful qualities to develop—this is the skillful way to practice.

So if we notice the hindrance of restlessness or whatever, to be willing to work with it, to engage with it, to use antidotes, to know for ourselves what calm is, to have a sense of the whole spectrum of these settled states of mind—calm, tranquility, peace, equanimity—we explore them and know them for ourselves. To be willing to bring in more energy into the practice when that's what's needed, to connect more directly to our experience. If we're feeling passive, kind of laid back in practice, to be willing to notice that and come forward just enough to meet experience. So practice becomes this flow of balancing.

We never get it completely right. It really is so much like the tightrope walker on the tightrope. We're always moving and balancing. There's no one right way. But this willingness to engage and explore is what brings the practice alive. And knowing these maps, being willing to set out and explore them for yourself, is what allows these factors to develop.

As I said, I'm a bird watcher, and I often read bird books. It's always interesting to me how I'll read the books and put them away, then be out somewhere and see a bird I've never seen before. Just the thought will come, "Oh, that's a yellow-bellied sapsucker." I'd never seen one—we don't have them back in California—but just the information is there, and so the recognition can come in that instant.

I was also living in India a while ago. Again, I'm from Australia, and we have very different birds there. I heard this sound one day, and I thought, "Well, if a woodpecker was going to make a sound, that's the kind of sound a woodpecker might make." So I started looking, and I saw my first woodpecker.

It's just that inclination of the mind. If we have the information and are willing to trust ourselves, to open to experience, to meet it fully—not push away the difficult or try to hold on to what's pleasant—all of these experiences can open up for us. They're not that distant from us.

So we begin with this simple act of mindfulness, of just knowing what's happening. From that, the whole path can unfold for us. The wisdom and the equanimity, the possibilities are right there as we simply continue with our practice. The simple acts of sitting and walking and knowing we're sitting and walking, of eating our food and taking care of the body—all of this leads, if it's done with mindfulness, with care, to the development of these factors and greater and greater degrees of freedom.

I want to close with the words of the Buddha from the Aṅguttara Nikāya:

"Imagine, Uttiya, a royal frontier fortress with strong foundations, strong walls and towers, and a single gate. There at the gate is a wise gatekeeper, experienced and intelligent, who keeps out strangers and lets in only those she knows. As she patrols along the road around the fortress, she would see not any joints or openings in the wall large enough for even a cat to slip through. And although she wouldn't know exactly how many living beings entered or left the fortress, she would know that whatever living beings of any size entered or left the fortress, they would all leave or enter through that one gate.

In the same way, the Tathāgata is not concerned that the whole world or half of it or one-third of it will find freedom by means of the Dhamma. What he does know is this: All of those who have found freedom, or are finding freedom, or will find freedom have done so by abandoning the five hindrances, their minds well established in the four foundations of mindfulness, developing as they actually are the seven factors of enlightenment. This is how they found freedom, or are finding freedom, or will find freedom."

CHAPTER 37

What Is True Compassion?

Sharda Rogell · 53 min

In this profound exploration of compassion as a brahmavihāra practice, Sharda Rogell investigates what constitutes true compassion versus ordinary emotional reactions. Drawing on the imagery of Avalokiteśvara with a thousand arms and eyes, she illuminates the capacity to meet all beings without turning away from suffering. Rogell presents Sukhni Rinpoche's teaching that authentic compassion contains three elements: sadness (recognizing we cannot end suffering), responsibility (the impulse to help), and joy (the vitality of awakened presence).

The talk examines the crucial relationship between compassion and emptiness (suññatā), explaining that true compassion arises naturally as the fixation on self dissolves. Rogell shares personal stories from her years teaching in Bodh Gaya, India, including her initial inability to answer how one deals with overwhelming suffering, and a touching encounter with Ram Dass that revealed how our projections can obscure reality. She draws on the wisdom of multiple teachers including the Dalai Lama, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, and Suzuki Roshi to show how emptiness serves as the "fairy dust" in compassion.

Practically, Rogell encourages what she calls "heroic compassion"—using difficulties as doorways to awakening rather than obstacles to practice. She emphasizes that compassion requires both wisdom and the willingness to be touched by life, describing Joanna Macy's concept of the "tantric flip" where turning toward suffering opens the heart. The teaching invites practitioners to expand their capacity for openness while remaining grounded in present-moment awareness, recognizing that infinite possibilities exist for the human heart.

Tonight I'd like to talk about compassion. I want to talk about this mostly because we've still been doing some compassion practice these last few weeks, and this week we're going to change to another Brahma Vihara—we're going to change to mudita, or joy. So I wanted to speak about compassion while a number of you were still involved in the compassion practice. It's a way of bringing it out more fully. But also because one way to actually talk about our practice is to talk about it as awakening to our compassionate heart. What we are actually settling into, when the mind drops—sometimes I like to think of when the mind drops out of the head area and down into the heart, into more of a fullness of our being—we begin to touch our compassion.

What is compassion? What is true compassion? I want to look at this quality of the heart when the heart is really free. There is a beautiful Tibetan tanka in the hall at Spirit Rock where I teach sometimes, in the community hall in the lower hall. It's a very, very large tanka, about the size of part of that wall over there. I love that it's there, right near the teaching podium. This tanka is a painting of Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, depicted with a thousand arms. When you look at the painting, there's this whole wide circle of arms all around him, and it looks like a halo, so many arms. In the middle of each forearm and each hand, there is an eye, looking out. What it depicts is this archetype of being able to touch all the beings of the world, to see all beings of the world in this open stance, open heart, open mind, receiving all the suffering beings in the world. It's really very powerful to see that openness, with all those arms and eyes for every being, not turning away from any suffering being.

The male archetype is Avalokiteshvara, but Kuan Yin is the feminine archetype, the goddess of compassion. Sometimes it's said that Kuan Yin hears all the cries in the world. That open-hearted quality of not turning away. This is really a beautiful metaphor for us as we relax and open to the way things are.

True compassion is a natural expression of an awake mind—an awake mind and an open heart. It's one manifestation of this awake mind, which we could say expresses itself as love or loving-kindness, metta. This expression of love, in terms of compassion, is turned towards the suffering aspect of life. We turn the love towards that, this love that is open, this love that is able to be in contact with the way things are. The love is turned towards suffering, and with true compassion, there's also an impulse to want to relieve that suffering. In the contact comes the impulse or the wish, the desire to have that being be free of their pain, of their suffering.

When we feel true compassion, this is balanced with equanimity. It's this equanimity which allows a stillness in the mind, a non-reactiveness, which then gives us the capacity to sustain the contact with the painful element—to sustain the contact without being repelled, without withdrawing, or without acting out and pushing away. This equanimity allows us to remain present even in the face of this difficulty.

Compassion can often be experienced as a relaxed openness, a softness, or a tenderness in the heart. Oftentimes we speak of the experience of compassion as a quivering in the heart, and I like that. We say that often because that sense of the quivering in the heart is so real, so true when we're in contact with it. We can actually feel the kind of vibration within the center of our heart as we open to compassion. It's really a very beautiful state of mind.

One of our teachers, Tsoknyi Rinpoche, talks about three aspects at the root of compassion that are all present together. He says these three aspects are sadness, a sense of responsibility, and joy. I think it's so interesting to reflect on these because you wouldn't think that true compassion would actually have either sadness or joy in it. It seems kind of incongruent to imagine that that can be the case. And also this sense of responsibility. So how do we understand this?

We feel the sadness, Tsoknyi says, because we realize that we can't end the suffering. In that knowing, in that recognition of the truth that no matter what I do, it's very unlikely that I'm going to be able to end the suffering, compassion has that wisdom, that understanding in it.

The responsibility that arises is that desire to reach forward. It's actually an energetic impulse to reach forward, to support or to help, to relieve the pain, even though we know that it's unlikely that we can.

And the joy—how interesting that there can be joy and sadness together. I think that the joy comes from the vitality that's present from being awake.

The joy and vitality that arise when we're in contact with things the way they are. A joy that emerges in presence itself when we are fully engaged with what's true. It is a joyful experience to be here fully with what is.

This is from an abbess at a Korean seminary for three hundred nuns, Myung Song Sunim, who speaks about compassion as great compassion. It's said in Korea that when one speaks of compassion, they always speak of great compassion. And she speaks of a compassion that is engaged, not distant—not when we're just sitting on a perch away from everything, kind of removed from life and simply feeling our heart full of compassion, but one where we're actually in touch with the way things are directly.

She says, "Great sadness means that when someone falls into a lot of suffering, we spend much energy to get them out of it. It also means that when sentient beings are sad, we are sad with them. When they cry, we also cry. Great love means that when sentient beings are happy, we are happy with them. Being sad together, being happy together—this is great compassion. Great love means that we give great happiness. Great sadness means that we deliver people from their suffering."

I really love that because it brings in the emotional heart, where we're actually feeling touched, feeling moved. It's not a detached or cut off or distant kind of compassion, but we can be sad, we can cry, we can be engaged. The heart moves in many, many different ways.

I think it was mentioned that with sadness, it's easy to think that it shouldn't be here. Somehow that feeling of sorrow or sadness is supposed to go when we become more awake, when we become more free. But I think that sadness is actually a kind of moisturizer on the heart. It gives some juiciness to our practice. It keeps us awake, keeps us attentive, keeps us engaged.

Yet without understanding—really understanding the way things are with wisdom, that things are changing, that things are selfless, that things are ultimately unsatisfying—we can get lost in our sorrow and grief. We can get caught in our attachments to how we want things to be. There can be a caring, but without that deeper understanding, we remain caught in ordinary feelings, ordinary daily feelings. And this is really not true compassion, but an expression of some attachment.

When this isn't seen, we can be thrown into states of sorrow and grief, self-pity, even self-righteousness about what's happening. We can get paralyzed, frozen, unable to act in any kind of wise and responsive way. And these states, because they're so strong, can also cover up deeper feelings of helplessness—more vulnerable feelings of our helplessness, which can be hard to touch.

Yet this changes. Sometimes we're caught in these stronger states and sometimes we feel more freed up. It's not like we necessarily get stuck in one or the other. We can see that there are lots of changing mind states. Sometimes we can be more open and allowing. Other times our caring and concern can turn into holding on. This is very natural.

I was very touched by a story that Sharon Salzberg told once when she was teaching a retreat at Spirit Rock. It just so happened that during that retreat, their friend—Joseph and Sharon's friend Ram Dass—came to visit. Ram Dass, as many of you may know, had a stroke some time ago that caused a great deal of paralysis in his body and some problems in his speech. It has been a very challenging, very difficult situation for him and his friends and his community.

So Ram Dass came in his van that's all geared up for him and his attendant, and they came and met Joseph and Sharon. Sharon tells the story that when Ram Dass was getting ready to leave—they had met in the council house, which you have to go up some steps and then come down some steps—when he had to go down these steps, he seemed to be in so much pain. He was really grimacing and making some moans and really having a hard time getting down. Finally he got down, and then he got in his van, and it seemed like such a lot of work and effort.

Sharon was just saying how her heart was in so much pain watching Ram Dass go through this very difficult and challenging way that he had to be in himself. So he got into his car, and Sharon went down and just said, "Oh, Ram Dass, I'm just so sorry. Are you okay?"

And Ram Dass looked at her and said, "Yeah, I'm okay. Are you okay?"

And in that moment, she really got how she had imagined—in a way that may not have been so accurate—what was actually going on for him. She was getting very contracted in how she wanted things to be for him. Yet when she asked him, he was absolutely fine.

It was simply the conditions he was dealing with at that time, but there didn't seem to be any way that he was caught in it.

I was so touched by that story—and also that Sharon would tell it. It's such a good example of how much we want things to be otherwise. But in this case, it wasn't even as she had imagined it to be. How often that can be true for us. We imagine when we see other people engaged in certain situations that things may be a certain way, when they may not be that way at all. So again, it's about taking a little more time, reflecting, sitting with what's actually happening. Are things really the way I imagine them to be?

This letting go. Our compassion manifests as we let go of our self-interests and our attachments to our desired outcomes. We can see how attached we get to the way we want things to be. We've spoken about this so much—this wanting things to be in our control, the way we want them to be. Carol was talking about this "me, me, me"—what does it mean to actually let go of this me? What about me? And yet as we loosen our grasping, as we loosen this fixation around the sense of ourselves, we begin to have more space. We feel more relaxed, a little more open to consider others, to be with others, to see others as they are—and also to hold ourselves with more kindness, with more care as we begin to let go.

Sogyal Rinpoche says, "After the concept of self dissolves, the expression of that realization is compassion." He's really pointing to what's there as we let go. That awake energy, that enlightened energy of being, is compassionate. As we let go, we're releasing a narrow view of the world, of ourselves, of others. And as we open, we gain a wider perspective, a more expansive view of the way things are.

Suzuki Roshi gave a teaching I once read on Kuan Yin, and perhaps it's a kind of koan, a spiritual question. Very simple. He just says: "Kuan Yin has a thousand hands. If we focus only on one hand, we lose 999 hands." What does this mean? I think it's really worth reflecting on.

For me, it means that if I focus only on one hand, it's the same thing as wanting things to be a certain way. Just wanting that one hand and all that it represents. I want something to be this way or that way, to see this, to feel that, to try to force something on myself or someone else. It's like putting myself in a box or someone else in a box—squeezing, pushing, manipulating. And when I do that, I lose 999 other hands. I lose all that possibility, all that's available in being able to respond with an open heart.

I'm not saying we have to always open to 999 possibilities or a thousand possibilities, because this may be too much for us. We may not be able to open in that way, and it can feel quite overwhelming if we try. But if we do feel that overwhelm, if we open in a way that so much is coming in and we feel overwhelmed, all we need to do—and this is what's so beautiful about this practice—is simply come back to being here right now. And even with that overwhelm, see if we can open our heart to that. That is the compassionate response. That is the expression of the thousand arms, right toward that overwhelm. We don't have to be any particular way.

Many of you know that I spent many years in India. I was going to Bodh Gaya every year for about fifteen winters, teaching at the Thai temple near the Bodhi tree, where the Buddha was enlightened. I went the first time twenty years ago, and I really think this is where my heart first opened, where I truly started to come in contact with life in all its diversity and variety.

If you've been to India or know about India, it can be a real assault to the senses—and to all of our fixations and holdings and attachments. It was very, very difficult for me. There's so much impinging: colors and smells and heat and spicy food, all on one extreme or the other, such a wide variety of extremes. Bodh Gaya is in Bihar, one of the poorest states in India. There's so much poverty—beggar children, sickness, suffering. Lots of noise. We would sit at the Thai temple, and one year there was a carnival happening next door with music and commotion. At times there were loudspeakers going and all-night music, because they don't have many TVs, so they would just blast a loudspeaker for everybody to hear.

So the Hindi movie music would be going for hours and hours. It just seemed like there wasn't any way to get away from the impingement. There was so much to deal with.

The first year that I was teaching there, I was asked to do some questions and answers in the hall, and people wrote down their questions on pieces of paper. I naively thought that I could probably handle many of the questions that were coming in, but

one question came in that really threw me. Of course, I didn't let anybody know that it threw me. But the question was: How do you deal with all this suffering? How do you deal? This was my first visit to India.

And the truth was, I had no idea. I had no idea. I couldn't say that at the time for some reason, but I wish I had, because that would have been the honest answer. I gave some kind of answer, and then later when Christopher, who I was teaching with, said something about how I did, he said, "You did really well with the questions, but that one question about suffering—you need a little work on that one. You're going to need to be in India a little bit longer to be able to answer that one."

It was really hard to allow myself not to know, because I had the sense that I should be able to open to all the suffering—the sense that it's possible to do that. And again, very naively and innocently thinking that could be the case. But I realized, this was twenty years ago, that I had no idea of the size of the cloth, no idea what I was actually even imagining that I could do.

Now I really understand that compassion can only open to the extent that I am free of the fixation of self—only to that extent. Because the fixation of self is actually what blocks the expression of that awakened energy as love, as compassion. I simply cannot express the caring nature as fully if I'm caught in all of my desires and attachments and hopes and wishes. It's not true compassion.

When we talk about letting go of the fixation of self, this points us to emptiness—to seeing the empty nature of self. Sukhni Rinpoche again says, "True compassion arises after the realization of emptiness." True compassion arises after the realization of emptiness. Another one of our dear colleagues, our monk friend Ajahn Amaro, says that emptiness is the fairy dust in compassion. Very playfully—emptiness is the fairy dust in compassion—which really opens up the heart to true compassion.

So what do we mean? How do we understand emptiness here? One doorway for the revelation of emptiness is seeing into the impermanent nature of things, as Joseph talked so beautifully about the other night. Seeing things that come into existence, stay for a while—a moment, a little while—and then disintegrate. This is what reveals to us a nature that is not fixed, that everything is in transition. Everything is empty of any substantiality. We say empty of self-existence—it cannot exist by itself. Everything coming and going, coming and going.

And it's this empty nature which is the openness that allows for things to be born, unfold, and pass away. There has to be an empty, open space in order for this creativity to manifest. Otherwise things would be locked, compacted, fixed—as we imagine the

self to be. And yet when we look at the self, we can see how it's changing moment to moment to moment. Sometimes we see it more directly in a momentary way. Sometimes we see it through the day as our moods change, our emotions change, events change, light changes—dark, weather, cold, heat. We feel all these changes. We see all these changes. Things move because they are free. Things are already free.

This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, from *The Heart Treasure of the Enlightened Ones*: "When sunlight falls on a crystal, lights of all colors of the rainbow appear, yet they have no substance that you can grasp. Likewise, all thoughts in their infinite variety—devotion, compassion, harmfulness, desire—are utterly without substance. There is no thought that is something other than emptiness. If you recognize the empty nature of thoughts at the very moment they arise, they will dissolve. Attachment and hatred will never be able to disturb the mind. No negative actions will be accumulated and no suffering will follow."

There may be moments that you experience when the sense of self is not so strong—different times through the day, or even times where there's a sense that it even fades away.

Or moments when there is no suffering. You're not experiencing the impingement or the contraction of the mind and the body. There's a sense that the self is not imposing itself so much on experience. There's a sense of more freedom, fluidity, flowing. The mind is more quiet, minding its own business.

These are tastes of momentary freedom. And these moments are very important to recognize because they really allow us to feel a deep connection with things. When the mind is quiet, when the heart is still, we can really be in touch with the subtlety of experience—even sometimes this moment-to-moment transient, changing experience. When we're not engaged in the usual distraction and identification, the desire and aversion and confusion in the mind, something starts to shift. And we might feel this sense of spaciousness, of calm, this feeling of metta, loving kindness, of true compassion, just for the way things are.

We know this experience. Many people have had this experience. These moments are so important because they really reveal to us what's possible, our capacity as human beings. Sometimes it may be when you're walking outside or in the woods, at sunset or in the early mornings, and the mind opens, the heart opens. It might be when you're sitting in here, just these moments when you feel a sense that even when you touch the pain, it's okay. The heart feels so big. And in some ways you may even sense

that it's not even your pain any longer, but that it's the pain of the world. It's the pain of being human in this body, in this world. You can almost have a sense of some impersonal nature to it.

And yet at other times we feel the constriction of the small self, the birth of me, me, me. When we're self-aware, when we're aware of this, we can feel the forces of greed, hatred, and confusion in the mind at play. And then it's easy to judge ourselves, to reject ourselves, and not be very compassionate. In these moments, we can think we have so far to go. The whole sense of past, present, future—all of time comes into play. "It's going to be forever before I'm free, before my heart opens." This kind of solidified view that we can start to have about the way things are, rather than even remembering that an hour ago, we were very quiet and still, and our heart was open and soft and moist. This view can come in and hijack the way things actually are.

This is from Chuang Tzu, and I read this early in my practice days. I've always loved this. It's called "The Empty Boat":

If a man is crossing a river and an empty boat collides with his own skiff, even though he be a bad-tempered man, he will not become very angry. But if he sees a man in the boat, he will shout at him to steer clear. If the shout is not heard, he will shout again and yet again and begin cursing, and all because there is somebody in the boat. Yet if the boat were empty, he would not be shouting and he would not be angry. If you can empty your own boat crossing the river of the world, no one will oppose you. No one will seek to harm you. Since he judges no one, no one judges him. Such is the free one. His boat is empty.

Yet all the great teachers say that emptiness itself is not enough—that we must also practice compassion. One time the Dalai Lama was asked, if we had a choice to put our efforts into deepening our practice of wisdom or practicing compassion, which one would he advise us to practice? And without thinking for very long at all, he said, "Compassion. Much more important to practice compassion. From there, the wisdom will awaken."

Because emptiness without compassion can actually feel brittle or dry. We can feel disconnected from the way things are. Since everything is empty, one can hold on to a view that nothing exists or that nothing ever happened. We have a friend who really loved to play with this view of nothing ever happened, nothing really exists. It's fun to play with that sometimes and just get into that dreamlike, insubstantial nature of things. And then he adopted a little girl, quite young. And it became something of a joke. We said, "So nothing ever happened? Nothing ever happened?" Because of course, when you have a little baby, is nothing happening? The whole of everything breaks loose. Everything starts to explode.

So, you know, it just kind of flies in the face of that belief. Because even though everything is empty, beings do exist. Of course beings exist. And there is suffering—outer suffering, inner suffering. These conditions do not go away. Maybe things become more transparent or more insubstantial, but there is still pain. There's still the first noble truth: there is suffering in this world. No matter what, these conditions do not go away.

The true compassion that arises from the revelation of emptiness means that we have unlimited compassion for the infinity of beings in this world. That's what the revelation of emptiness points to—this capacity to meet the world as it is.

One teacher said that understanding the ultimate knowledge of the nature of things together with great compassion is the only way to truly eradicate suffering. Both the deep understanding of the nature of things and great compassion—this is the way we will eradicate suffering. And why is this? Why do we need both? Because then we aren't reacting to things out of our own egoic needs and desires and attachments. It comes back to the fixation of me, what I want, what I think is supposed to happen.

As we let go and allow our mind and our heart to open, our heart can be touched by the conditions of this world. Not only the painful ones, but also the pleasant ones, the beautiful ones. And as we allow ourselves to be touched in this way, we may begin to quietly wonder. These questions start to come into our mind. Why? Why are things the way they are? Why do beings suffer so? It doesn't make any sense. We can't understand it.

One time when I was in India, I had the opportunity of sitting with a young Indian man. Well, he was probably about seventeen—a boy, really. He was the son of the chaiwala who ran a shop outside our monastery, where we taught over the years. His name was Sanjay. He had been there since he was a little boy, and as the years went on, he grew up. Because a number of Westerners came around to the monastery and also had chai at his father's shop—a very tiny little shop—he was able to start learning English. It was really quite phenomenal that there was a way we could start to engage with him.

One day, after some years, I wanted to sit with him and ask him a few questions about his life. I asked him simple things, like what he ate for breakfast. He said he has a chapati—just a little wheat flour bread—and some tea, chai. If they're lucky, they'll get some milk for the tea. That's breakfast. And lunch? Rice. And maybe, if we're lucky, some curd, some yogurt, and some local vegetables. Dinner was tea again, with a chapati.

Hearing about the simplicity of his life, the realities of living in a poor village just behind the town, I remember sitting with him and feeling this sense of: why Sanjay and not me? How come I'm not Sanjay, living the same life? I felt so privileged. I felt so wealthy. I felt like I had so much in my life. And at the time, I really didn't have very much at all. I was mostly just traveling with a backpack, had no home, was living very simply. But it was like: why?

Why? And it's like you can't answer those kinds of questions, and yet the heart wants to know. It goes very deep in the wonderings, in the reflection of how is it that things can be the way they are. And we don't know. And yet we can let our hearts be touched in the wondering. We can let our heart be touched in the not knowing, and something awakens for us.

And in some ways, we're not quite as afraid of the pain in the world. We can come more fully into our humanity and our shared humanity—that we share this together. We're not separate. We're not isolated beings. Everything we do affects everyone else. We start to feel this more deeply. And as much as we may want to resist and push that which is so difficult away, we see more and more that this is really the doorway to the wellspring of our love, the wellspring of our connection to others, to ourself, to life.

This is from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: "If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility."

As we open to the truth, compassion arises. Compassion means to suffer with—*com passio*, with passion. To be compassionate means we are capable of suffering. By being with suffering, one awakens.

Joanna Macy, this wonderful teacher and scholar, says that this is a tantric flip. She calls it the tantric flip—that when we turn towards suffering, the heart opens. Compassion opens. We don't want to. We don't want to turn towards the pain, but yet that is the doorway to the awakening. It's so counterintuitive. We want to resist it. We want to push it away. But it is through that doorway that the heart awakens. This tantric flip happens.

So we're encouraged to actually use the difficulties in our life, in our practice, to enhance our practice. And this is a heroic kind of practice. We might call it heroic compassion. Because we usually view the things in our life as obstacles or inconveniences to our practice when things aren't going the way we want them to go. And we can even disregard our practice. We can say, "I don't want to practice right now. I want to wait for

times to be better. I want to feel better before I meditate or before I actually get more still or more quiet. Things are just too tough right now." And we can just postpone. Just keep postponing.

This is what the Dalai Lama says: "If you can't practice when you are suffering because of what it does to your mind, and you can't practice when you are happy because of attachment to your happiness, then there will never be a time when you can practice at all."

When can we practice if we're not actually seizing this moment the way it is?

Or we may find that we just don't want to deal with something. We just kind of want to deny or pretend that it isn't even going on. Just kind of skim over it completely. Cover over it.

This is a story that I really love. One of our friends tells this story. My friend's father was a young child driving with his own father in a car on December 7, 1941. A sudden announcement came over the car radio: the Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor. Immediately, the father leaned over and said urgently to his son, "Don't tell your mother." When my friend heard this story from his father, he thought, "Right, maybe he hoped she wouldn't notice any of World War II."

That's a bit of an extreme, but it's like that. Don't walk into that room. Just stay where you are. Things could get too difficult. But we take this on as a practice.

It's one way to practice. And we could hold it like this: I will not hold anything as my enemy. I will not hold anything as my enemy. It's very powerful when you reflect on it. Or: I will have an attitude of openness to all of life, even to that which is unpleasant. It's a kind of inclining the mind, turning the mind in this way towards this inclusiveness of our experience.

This is courageous. It's courageous practice. I think this is very courageous practice that we're doing. It takes tremendous courage to sit in the openness to the way things are, a deep willingness to face what's true.

This is from Hafiz:

Don't surrender your loneliness so quickly.
Let it cut more deep.
Let it ferment and season you
as few human or even divine ingredients can.
Something missing in my heart tonight

has made my eyes so soft,
my voice so tender,
my need of God absolutely clear.
Don't surrender your loneliness so quickly.

It really points to that letting the heart be touched—in the tenderness, in the quivering. Such a beautiful place within our beings.

Someone asked the Dalai Lama if he gets angry at the Chinese. And he said, "Almost not." Isn't that wonderful? Almost not. And I think really what's being said there is that there are enemies, but we learn not to hold them as enemies. Because if we do, it corrupts our own hearts. It keeps us divided. It poisons us if we hold on to that. How can we release it? This is our practice.

Practicing compassion means that we practice acceptance. Practicing compassion means we practice equanimity—the mind that is free of reacting. We say, I accept this because it's happening. I may not like it, but it's happening. As Byron Katie, another wonderful teacher, says, reality is the highest order. We may want it to be very, very different, but what are we going to do?

So that question I was asked in the hall twenty years ago—how do I deal with all this suffering?—how would I answer it today? When I reflect on it, I think one of the things that's very apparent to me is I see how many ideals and expectations and desires and wants I had then. And I see now that really what is being asked of me is just to start where I am, just to be here, just to be honest and truthful with just this right now. What is my capacity right now?

Because I see that really what this practice is teaching us is how to expand our capacity for openness, how to expand and deepen our wisdom, how to open our heart. And my sense more and more is that there are infinite possibilities for us as human beings, infinite capacities for what's possible for our heart and our mind.

I think it was Carol who once said, when I was on a three-month course, in one of her dharma talks: It's best to take a long view, have a long-range view, because so much is possible for us. We can't even begin to know.

I'll end with this poem, one of the Awakening Poems from Chokling Rinpoche, the brother of Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, another Tibetan lama. He says:

When watching the magical display of this world as it seems to be,
spontaneously an overwhelming despair and pity well up in me.
When watching its nature of innate simplicity as it really is,

I cannot help but feel wonder and break out in laughter.
When watching, the one who feels pity and the one who is laughing
both disappear and cannot be found.
Now, what to do?

Let's sit for just a minute.

May I be a bridge and a ship for those who want to cross the water.
May I be an island for those who seek one and a lamp for those desiring light.
May I be a bed for all who wish to rest and a hand for those who need a help.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 38

Second Noble Truth: Craving (Taṇhā)

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong offers a comprehensive exploration of the Second Noble Truth from the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11). He examines taṇhā—literally meaning 'thirst'—as the Buddha's diagnosis for the origin of dukkha, sharing how this teaching personally opened a doorway to freedom during his early practice. Armstrong distinguishes between unwholesome desires (taṇhā, lobha, rāga, kāmacchanda) and wholesome ones (chanda, dhammachanda, sammāsaṅkappa), clarifying that craving fundamentally means wanting things to be different than they are.

The talk thoroughly investigates the three types of craving: kāma-taṇhā (craving for sense pleasures), bhava-taṇhā (craving for existence and becoming), and vibhava-taṇhā (craving for non-existence). Armstrong contextualizes these teachings for lay practitioners navigating between monastic-style retreat practice and everyday life, drawing on the Udāna to caution against both rigid asceticism and blind pursuit of sense pleasures. He references the Saṃyutta Nikāya's teaching about the hawk and quail, where the Buddha identifies the four foundations of mindfulness as a practitioner's true 'home ground.'

Practically, Armstrong emphasizes how mindfulness acts as a brake on craving's momentum, gradually wearing away deeply conditioned patterns. He encourages practitioners to investigate for themselves—with eyes open—how following or restraining desire affects their liberation, noting Joseph Goldstein's insight that 'restraint of sense desire enables us to verify its empty nature.' The talk concludes by pointing toward the Third Noble Truth: the complete cessation of craving as the path to freedom.

Earlier in the retreat, I talked about the first noble truth in the Buddha's first discourse, which is the truth of dukkha with its wide range of meanings from direct suffering to unreliability. I talked about how along with each noble truth comes a line of advice, a prescription for what to do with it. With the first noble truth, the prescription was that the truth of suffering, of dukkha, is to be fully understood. We went into the range of what that means.

Tonight I want to talk about the second noble truth. I'll begin by reading what the Buddha said in that sutta, Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma:

Now what is the noble truth of the origin of suffering? It is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight now here and now there, that is, craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence, craving for non-existence.

When I first started to hear the Buddha's teachings, this was a very meaningful teaching for me. I think I mentioned that I came into practice because of unhappiness and confusion in my life. The experience at that time was that I was suffering in this kind of dark cloud of unknowing. I had no idea which way to turn, if there was a way out, the direction of the way out, or anything. When I heard this teaching, it was a revelation because it said there is a cause for unhappiness, and the cause is craving. I knew that somebody had figured this puzzle out, and that gave me tremendous faith and inspiration. I wasn't just lost in this massive cloud any longer—somebody had found what was putting it together. And anytime something has a cause, that cause can be undone. So this was really my doorway to freedom, hearing the second noble truth. It was very meaningful for me.

The Buddha's pointing to craving as the cause of suffering doesn't deny other people's analyses of the causes of suffering. In the Western world, there are many other analyses of what causes suffering. Marx analyzed it and brought it down to political and economic factors. Those are still valid. Freud analyzed it in terms of childhood development. Those may still be valid. Franz Fanon analyzed it in terms of cultural oppression based on race. That is still valid. So there are solutions on other levels—economic, political, cultural, racial, psychological—that are valid in their own domains. But the Buddha's analysis is so valuable because the domain that it applies to is the domain of liberation. I don't know of any other system that provides an analysis that allows for our own liberation. This is the context of the second noble truth.

The word that he used, almost universally translated as craving, is the Pali term taṇhā. Its original meaning is simply thirst. This is not a complicated psychological term in Pali. It just means thirst. You'll see that the Buddha did this often with his terminology—he would take a familiar word from the culture and reframe it to suit his teachings. Nirvana actually has a history within India prior to the Buddha's adopting it as well.

I like this metaphor of thirst because it points to the deeply embedded nature of taṇhā, and also its recurring feature. If we are thirsty and we take a drink, we're satisfied, we're quenched for a while. But as we go longer, the mouth gets dry again, and we're thirsty again. Taṇhā is like this. It recurs again and again. The satisfaction is only temporary, and then the thirst comes back. It's this recurrent nature of craving, the incessant quality of it, that I think explains the phrase Sally used a couple of talks ago

when she spoke about our human inability to sustain contentment. We are unable to sustain contentment because, if we have not examined the mind, this force comes in again and again and tells us you need something else—and you need it now. So an initial contentment may be there. You'll find moments of deep peace and contentment in your practice. But watch: at some point, the following message will come. It's not enough. Now you need this thing. Finding delight now here and now there.

The word desire has gotten a bad rap in Buddhism. You'd get a bad rap too if you were the cause of suffering. But we have talked about the fact that there are different kinds of desire.

There are desires that lead to suffering, and there are desires that lead in the direction of freedom.

Some of the desires that lead toward suffering include tanha or craving, lobha or greed, raga or lust, and kamachanda or sense desire. Some of the ones that lead in the direction of wholesome states of mind are chanda—when connected with our practice, often translated as zeal—as a base for spiritual success. There is dhammachanda, a love for the Dhamma, the truth. There is sammasankapa, or right attitude, right intention, including the aspiration or the wish for freedom. And in all the metta and compassion phrases we've used, the wish for others' well-being and our own well-being—these are wholesome desires.

Craving is not. So let us be clear about this one. It is always viewed as a disturbing factor in the mind and a cause of suffering, either subtle or gross. Although it's put in terms of a desire force, it's important to understand that craving doesn't just mean the greed force. It encompasses the whole notion that things should be different than they are. It encompasses greed, aversion, and delusion.

You can see in this way that greed and aversion are just two sides of the same coin. When we have an idea of the way we want things to be, then we resist anything that is different from that. Greed and aversion depend on one another. Delusion is that we don't see how we're doing this—we don't see that we're trying to manipulate the present moment out of greed or aversion to shape it a different way. So the fundamental meaning of craving is wanting things to be different than the way they are.

One of the qualities you find in craving that you don't find in wholesome desires is that it lacks qualities of wisdom, because it's accompanied by delusion, and it lacks the quality of patience. Craving has an urgency that says, "I need it now." There's this immediate yearning and dissatisfaction with craving. We can have an aspiration for freedom, but accompanied by wisdom, we understand that the path to freedom is one of some

duration. We have the accompanying quality of patience that lets us settle in contentment and peace, even though we haven't reached the goal. Craving doesn't have this quality of patience.

Just to highlight this mixture of the kilesas, the Buddha said that one should make an end to suffering without making an end to greed, aversion, and delusion—that is impossible. These other three are bound up intrinsically in craving.

I like this word craving because it seems to apply so much to what we see in the world today. The world has changed a lot since I was a kid, and much of it, it seems to me, is not for the better. One of the things I see—and I suppose my generation has to take some responsibility—is a world where in Western society today, in America particularly, all kinds of restraints and prohibitions have just been thrown out the window. You see people involved in the naked pursuit of pleasure through many means.

Unrestrained sexuality is held up as a reasonable form of pursuit. Violence is condoned or even glamorized in our culture. Dress has gone far from the style of modesty I grew up with. The use of drugs has become so prevalent that it hardly gets noted until somebody gets arrested, which doesn't happen all that often. There's this culture that anything goes today. Anything goes. Young actresses and stars go out on the town and behave in outrageously bad ways, and it only serves to heighten their celebrity because gossip sells. Then they get a bigger contract than they had before.

I have to say—and I don't consider myself a prude by any means; I lived through the sixties and participated wholeheartedly—I was kind of shocked when the queen knighted Mick Jagger. If I can think of anyone who represents the excesses of behavior initiated by the sixties, it would probably be Mick Jagger. For him to be recognized and elevated to that status as a revered cultural icon was a little much. What message does that send to our children?

I started feeling a bit like a temperance preacher in the 1890s. But you have to ask the question: Is this lack of restraint leading to real happiness? Or was there something in those old-fashioned standards that were called morality? Now, I don't think they were necessarily pinned by a lot of wisdom. But maybe as they had evolved over millennia, concepts like refraining from sexual misconduct, refraining from the use of drugs and intoxicants that cause heedlessness—maybe there's something to those quaint old ideas.

One of the things I find interesting to see in modern culture is the difference between the gratification of craving on the one hand and what leads to happiness on the other. As we explore the qualities of restraint through our precepts, we find what

more genuinely leads to happiness. One of the things I sometimes reflect on is how you can see the outcome of someone's life in their face after a certain age. Someone said that by age fifty, human beings get the face they deserve. I don't know about that. But one photo that's very revealing to me is that of Keith Richards, the lead guitarist for the Stones.

Keith Richards was born in 1943, so he was 64 that year. And his face carries the lines of considerable aging. Then you look at the face of the Dalai Lama, who was born eight years earlier than Richards, making him 72 that year. And you see the clarity of his skin, his complexion, and you have to ask: which is the wiser path to follow?

On a scale even bigger than the Rolling Stones, when we look through the whole world from a broad historical view, I think you've probably seen this many times—it itself is driven by the forces of greed, hatred, and delusion. As the Buddha commented in the third discourse he gave, he said, "All is burning." And burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, burning with the fire of hatred, burning with the fire of delusion.

The world looks like this today, and I think it has probably always looked like this. I doubt there has ever been a time in human history that there has not been war. War is the most visible eruption of the forces of greed and hatred and confusion, but it's not the only one. Throughout the world, we see the effects of corporate greed in the destruction of the environment, the level of pollution. We see personal greed in the frauds that have occurred on Wall Street. We see the effects of racism, domestic violence, the abuse of children. The list goes on and on. You look at any one of these and you can see the driving forces of greed, hatred, and delusion in the minds of individuals carrying out these actions.

The Buddha said, "Clouded by ignorance and driven by craving, sentient beings wander through samsara." This really is the story of the world today, and I think always has been the story of the world. So by purifying our hearts, we help to break this pattern. By reducing the force of greed, hatred, and delusion in our own individual being and taking that back into the world, we help to change it just a little bit at a time.

One of the other comments about craving that appears in this statement of the Second Noble Truth is the Buddha's observation that "it is this craving which leads to renewed existence." What he's pointing to here is the quality of rebirth. He's saying that it's craving—the force of craving in our mind—that leads to our being born again.

There was an interesting thing that happened on my very first three-month course. I sat here in 1977; it was the second three-month course here at IMS. One of my friends on that retreat came up to Joseph, who was of course teaching back then. And you

know how, as yogis, you can get very kind of wide-eyed and innocent? The psychological term for it is "regressed," but I kind of like wide-eyed and innocent people. So my friend was in this very wide-eyed and open place, and she came up to Joseph. I think she just found him in the lobby one time and said, "Joseph, why are we here?" And Joseph said, "Do you mean here on this retreat, or do you mean here in this universe?" She said, "Here in this universe." And Joseph said, "Because you wanted to see and smell and taste and hear and touch. That's why you're here."

It is this craving that leads to renewed existence. We're all here because we wanted, again, to see and smell and hear and taste and touch. That's kind of mind-boggling, isn't it? That's the volition that brings us back to experience pleasant sensations again. It's kind of wild.

Retreat is, of course, the perfect place to look at this force of craving. It happens again and again, even though you know you're not going to get very much out of it. The retreat situation is rather bare of sense pleasures, but it doesn't stop the force of craving from arising. So we do get to see its conditioned and recurring nature over and over again. We're here, of course, not to gratify the force but to learn about it. We turn our intention from satisfaction to understanding. Then every arising becomes a new possibility for understanding. And what's important is to trust that we can learn from it and not have to run after it.

So if craving comes up in terms of desire, we can watch it. If it comes up in terms of aversion, we can avoid blaming the outer situation and instead try to understand our own response. Craving arises now here and now there. It picks different objects again and again and again, and this is the key to its entrancement, its ability to enchant us. It keeps directing our attention in new places, so we may get bored with one, but craving will find another. *Ah, that's really the one.* So it keeps the target moving.

But each new thing seems to offer the promise of some kind of lasting satisfaction. Part of the delusion within craving is that we forget about impermanence. We don't look beyond the achievement of that particular satisfaction. We get some sense, some subconscious sense, that it's going to be more lasting than it is.

This tendency has been verified by psychological research. There's a researcher from Harvard named Daniel Gilbert who has published a whole book on our inability to predict what will make us happy and what will make us unhappy. The conclusion is that in both cases we forget about impermanence. We forget how quickly happy things will fade, but we also forget that unhappy things—even things like breaking a leg—will

also fade in time, and we are more afraid of them than we really need to be. There's a kind of homeostasis in our happiness level that we will return to, independent of these changing circumstances. But we don't understand that very well.

This pursuit is tiring. As you probably know, when you feel the mind in a state of agitation, it's not restful. And if it's like that all day, you probably want to go to bed about an hour before you do in a time when the mind is more balanced.

There was an interesting story in Newsweek about Disneyland—you know, the place where the motto is "Where happiness never ends." The reporter was investigating that, and they happened to go into the staff dining room. Inside, the characters were still dressed in their costumes because they didn't really have time to change on their lunch break. So Mickey Mouse was sitting down at a table talking to Donald Duck. And what Mickey Mouse said was, "I've got to get some overtime. I don't have enough money to pay my therapist." So even in Disneyland.

The beautiful thing about our practice is that as this force of recurrent craving comes again and again, and we are simply willing to observe it, the mindfulness starts to slow it down. In a way, mindfulness acts as a brake on this force which has a huge amount of momentum—you could call it mental habit of mind. When we have this rolling wheel of desire turning again and again, mindfulness is like a brake pad applied to it, just starting to wear it away as we keep from reactivating or reconditioning it. And that's why the quality of peace begins to come in, because the craving stops leading us by the nose quite so often.

Another way to say craving is self-centeredness. The Dalai Lama often talks in these terms—that the root problem in the world is self-centeredness. This is really a synonym for craving. Do you notice how we don't get as upset about other people's problems? But the craving comes in around our problems.

This is one of the reasons the Dalai Lama is so lovable. I find this amazing. People often ask him, "Why do people like you so much? Why do people love you?" And he says, "I'm not really sure. But I think it's because I try to consider every other person as more important than myself." That's a bodhisattva of compassion. Wouldn't that be an amazing way to approach the world? Imagine, just a simple thing as going into lunch and feeling that everybody else's lunch was more important than our own. That would create such a different flavor and way to approach the table.

This is also the reason that the quality of bodhicitta, which Carol talked about the other night, is so powerful in meditation practice. Bodhicitta puts the emphasis in our practice on the well-being of others, so that even our dharma practice comes to be an

expression of our caring and moves our very motivation just a little bit away from self-centeredness. Of course we care about ourselves also, but we begin to bring other beings into the very core of our dharma practice.

This self-centeredness is a tricky thing. There was a family retreat here at IMS—retreats where we try to introduce whole families into dharma practice. What's interesting is that these retreats are creating a bit of a Buddhist family culture in the West. Children of all ages come, from three and four on up into the early teens, and then later teens have their own retreat here. Parents come with the children, so it's a whole family bonding experience.

During the family retreat, one of the meditation teachers asked a five-year-old boy, "What do you think will happen if you spend your whole life going around just trying to get what you want?" And the boy said, "Trouble." Also the truth of craving. He knew it better than some of us.

So in the Second Noble Truth, the Buddha said that there are three kinds of craving.

Craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence, craving for non-existence. I want to talk about these three kinds.

The craving for sense pleasures is this desire to have pleasant experience at the five senses: pleasant sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Interestingly, as I understand it, the mind door is not included in the craving for sense pleasures. At one point the Buddha was talking about the pleasure that came through his practice of strong concentration in the states of jhana. And he reflected on it as he was developing it, and he said, "I don't see anything to be afraid of in this kind of pleasure."

What I take that to mean is that as we start developing pleasant meditative states, if we have a desire for them—which we will and we do—that leads us to become more skillful in learning how to access them again and again. And we find that it is through relaxation and contentment and acceptance that those states start to open. So as I understand it, the desire for wholesome states of mind in our context leads us to greater skill in meditation and is not considered to be an unwholesome wish.

But I also want to point out that any wholesome desire—it could be the wish for liberation, the wish for concentration, or any wholesome state—can turn into craving. And the difference is if we demand that it happen now. If we can hold it with understanding that it's a quality that develops out of the proper causes and conditions, then we aren't ruffled when it isn't present. But if we start demanding that it happen now, then that becomes a craving also.

Look around the scope of the world and you can see how much time and money are spent satisfying these five sense desires. Just a simple one: taste—which isn't even the most compelling force in my life. The restaurant industry in the United States, in the year 2005, had annual revenues of $476 billion. And I think that was less than half of the overall food industry. So food alone is about a trillion dollars. But you can understand that restaurants are particularly about satisfying certain kinds of tastes, and it's half a trillion dollars just in this country.

Smell—which also doesn't seem like a big factor in my life of sense desire—perfumes alone had annual sales of $15 billion. Fifteen billion dollars, just for perfumes.

There's a lovely video up on the web, on YouTube, that I encourage you to watch when you get home. It was produced by the son of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who was a Tibetan teacher who founded a big sangha in Boulder. His son is Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, a teacher in his own right and a very creative individual. From one of his poems, a student or fan of his created a music video. It's a very good dharma teaching. The title of the video is "What About Me?" I'll just read some of the lines—I won't sing it for you; I'm going to spare you that.

"What about me? That's my first thought every morning. What happened to me is my last thought every night. I say this mantra all day long: what about me? When I take a shower I think, what about me? I hope this shower makes me feel happy. I hope this lunch makes me feel happy. I hope these clothes make me feel happy."

This is the spirit of the quest for sense pleasures. We're looking for that hit of happiness again and again and again. And as I said, there's some indication we want the happiness to last, which it doesn't. But there is also a truth that sense pleasures do bring a kind of happiness, and it's not to overlook that either.

When we think about our lives, imagine that you had no sense pleasures and that you also had no support of meditative states. That would be like being on retreat but you couldn't meditate well. That would be tough, wouldn't it? That could feel pretty bleak. So sense pleasures in daily life bring a kind of happiness. It's limited. It's temporary. But there is a kind of happiness. The Buddha called this carnal happiness, as opposed to spiritual happiness. But he acknowledged the pleasure in it.

He also said in another sutta—which I think someone mentioned earlier—the analogy of the two darts: how we get pierced by a painful feeling, that's the first dart, and then as our mind obsesses and worries about that pain, we inflict a second dart of men-

tal agitation if we're not a careful practitioner. But further along in that same sutta, he says that sense pleasure is the only way that an untaught, ordinary person knows to escape from painful feeling. This is a really interesting comment.

The only way that most people in the world know to escape from painful feeling is by going off and finding a sense pleasure to supplant it, to overcome it. This is really the foundation for addiction. When we are in the world and there is unpleasant experience, either bodily or mental, we develop a habitual pleasure that we go to again and again, one that tends to mask or cover over or numb the painful feeling. And because it works once, when the painful feeling comes again, we're inclined to seek that same pleasure again. So it could be addiction to drugs, addiction to food, addiction to sex, addiction to social contact, addiction to television, alcohol. All these forces are very powerful in our world.

Now the essence of monastic life is that practitioners basically make a vow not to use sense pleasures as a routine outlet. Even in taking ten precepts—and I know many of you here are practicing with eight—the tenth precept adds not using money, so that takes away your online shopping as well. We've given up sexuality, drinking and drugs, eating after the midday meal, entertainment, movies, music, adornments to beautify the body. It's very interesting: as you practice in an extended way with the eight or the ten precepts, you really find that all the normal ways we go for comfort get shut off or closed off to us. And what that does is throw us on our own inner resources, our own qualities of heart and mind. That's what develops the deeper kinds of satisfaction and what channels our aspiration into the path.

But most of us are not monastics. In fact, I'd say about ninety-eight percent of us here are not monastics. So as laypeople, we do not take those vows in daily life. That means sense pleasures are an integral part of our life as laypeople. On retreat, it's different. On retreat, your lifestyles are much more like monastic life. Even if you've only taken five precepts, you've renounced an incredible amount of worldly activity to come here, so your life is much more like a monastic life.

Speaking from my own personal experience, spending three months in a retreat like this would be more difficult for me, more arduous—perhaps more appealing, but more arduous—than spending three months in a monastic environment as an ordained monk but not in a retreat setting. The requirement of not talking, of solitude, and the relentless practice of mindfulness that you undertake here is, in itself, a very rigorous challenge. There are two hundred and twenty-seven vows in being an ordained monk in our tradition. I've done that a couple of times in my life, and I find that an easier practice, just speaking personally, for a limited period of time than what you are en-

gaged in. Now, people who take long-term monastic vows reach another whole level of challenge, so I don't want to make that comparison in any way. But for short temporary ordinations, which happen a lot in Thailand and Burma, I think what you are doing is more challenging.

I want to read a quotation from the Buddha, but let me preface it with a little story. This is from a sutta in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, but it's also in the Jātaka tales. I'll flesh the Jātaka tale out toward the end.

The Buddha tells this story of a hawk and a quail. The quail is flying through the air when the hawk comes down from above, swoops down, and catches the quail in his claws, preparing to take the quail off to eat it. The quail starts moaning and saying, "Oh, I should never have left my home. I should never have left my home ground. Now I'm going to be killed and eaten. I should never have left my home."

And the hawk says, "Well, what do you mean? What's your home?"

The quail replies that the earth, where there are these clumps of dirt—that's my home. If I were there, I would be safe.

The hawk, in a rather proud way, says, "I could catch you there too." So he says, "I will return you to your home and I will show you that I can catch you there too."

He lets the quail go. The quail goes back on the ground, runs around until she's right beside a clump of soil, then hops up onto the top of this clump and says to the hawk, "Okay, now I'm home."

The hawk begins a dive from the sky, accelerating very fast, coming really quickly toward the quail, about to pounce. But just then, the quail slips underneath this clump of soil. The hawk cannot break his plunge, and he shatters his breast on that clump of soil.

In the Jātaka tale, it's said that this was one of the lifetimes of the Buddha. The Buddha was—guess what?—the quail. Wisdom, modesty. The hawk was said to be Devadatta, his cousin who at a later point in his career tried to kill him. In this story, the Buddha survives.

After he told this story, the Buddha said, "This is a lesson not to leave your own resort, your own home, what is meant for you and where you are comfortable." So he said, "Practitioners, do not stray outside your own resort into the domain of others. Mara will gain access to those who do so." Mara is the personification of the unwhole-

some forces of mind. Mara will get a hold on them. And what is not a practitioner's resort? The five cords of sense pleasure. And what is a practitioner's resort? It is the four foundations of mindfulness.

Here, the practitioner is to be understood in the monastic or retreat setting. The Buddha is basically saying that for people like you, for people who are living a monastic life, your home ground is not the pursuit of sense pleasures. Your home ground is the four foundations of mindfulness. But he said there are others whose home ground is the pursuit of sense pleasures. Those people are laypeople.

So this sutta made me reflect that we lead lives with feet in two worlds. When we come on a retreat like this, we are living in many ways as monastics and spiritual contemplatives have lived over the centuries. When we go home, most of us who are not ordained are living as laypeople, and all the pursuits of sense pleasures are open and available to us. So how should we relate as laypeople, both here on retreat and at home? I think this is a very interesting exploration and quite a big question.

This is a passage from the Udana, a small book of the Buddha's sayings, from a sutta called "The Courtesan." It came about because some laypeople in a town nearby were actually quarreling over a courtesan, competing over who would be able to win her. And the Buddha was talking about two approaches to sense pleasure. This is what he said: "Those for whom precepts and practices are the essence of the teaching, for whom celibacy is the essence of practice—this is one extreme. Those who say there's no harm in sensual desire—this is the second extreme. Both of the extremes cause the growth of cemeteries."

Isn't that great? "Cause the growth of cemeteries." He's saying both lead to renewed existence. Both are not the way to liberation.

So one extreme holds to precepts, practices, and celibacy as the essence of spiritual life—not as a useful and supportive container, but the essence. This is too rigid a view. This does not give proper place to wisdom and samadhi. But the other extreme consists of those who say there's no harm in sensual desires. That's also an extreme view.

This is an ancient teaching, but I really see these two divergent attitudes in our community today. And perhaps you've experienced both of them in yourself, because I've felt both these attitudes ripple through my own mind.

One is the attitude that says any sense desire is wrong. The Buddha said sense desire was not conducive, so if I want something, that's bad. I shouldn't want anything. And even if I do want it, I shouldn't go for it because it's really not right. Don Juan was talking to Carlos Castaneda at one point in their relationship and said to Carlos, "You

began by not wanting to get attached to anything, but it ended up that you couldn't enjoy anything." If we have this judgmental attitude that desire is wrong, the heart will shrivel up. It becomes very barren. So this is one extreme. I've seen it in myself. I've seen it in others.

But the other extreme is to say there's no problem with following sense desires. Sense desires are beautiful. It's so lovely. That's not a problem. This also is a problem, because—let me talk a little bit about what I've seen as some of the difficulties with the blind pursuit of sense desires.

Number one, obviously, if we can't get what we want right then, and the desire is strong, we suffer.

We suffer.

Number two, how many times have you wanted something so much that you've gone ahead and pursued it and caused harm to other people, or caused harm to yourself? And basically, causing harm to others ends up causing harm to ourselves.

The third point is that the pursuit of sense desire as the relief from suffering does create that groove in the mind, which then conditions the mind to look for that same thing again. A lot of the sense desires that we experience on retreat are those old channels of the mind just playing out again and again. When I'm not feeling well, I need—or I want—social contact, or a drink, or a certain kind of food, or sex, or something like that. These are the grooves that we've worn through our own activity of looking to sense desire.

Another thing to look at with sense desire in outside life is how much time is spent in the cultivation, the refinement of taste, and the pursuit of those pleasures. As I look around—and this is not measured, I haven't done a survey, it's not a measured opinion—but as I look around, it's what most of the world does with what we call free time. When we don't have obligations to work or to family, what we do in free time generally is to find something that pleasures us in the five senses. So a lot of time of the world, as indicated by those restaurant and perfume figures, goes into this direction.

So, having a judgmental attitude doesn't work. Not questioning and blindly pursuing isn't in accord with the Buddha's teachings. What then are we to do as laypeople? And here's where I say I think each of us needs to make this investigation for ourselves and to really look into the question with our own freedom as the most important criterion. What is going to help the development of our own liberation in the most skillful way possible? Find out for yourself.

So the question comes up: a sense desire is present. It points me toward an object. Should I follow it? Should I not? What's the right thing to do? I don't want to do anything wrong. What would the Buddha tell me to do? What would Joseph tell me to do? I don't want to make a mistake. That's not the attitude we should have with our practice. We have to be free to investigate and explore and find for ourselves. The only way we can do that is to try. So let me try, but with my eyes really open. Let's see what happens if I follow. How does that lead? How does it feel? Maybe it will be fine. Maybe no one else will be harmed. Maybe I won't be harmed. But we go into it eyes open.

If we decide, this time, I'm not going to follow—I've followed it so many times in the past—this time, I'm curious. What will happen if I don't follow? And that's the practice of renunciation. In a way, you could say that the practice of renunciation is the practice of the Second Noble Truth, carrying out through our actions this abandoning of craving. And then what we find when we renounce is that the desire eventually passes. It seems so strong and so compelling for a while, but if we stay with it, eventually it passes. So we learn we have the capacity to just sit through its lifespan, not to have to act on it.

Joseph had a very nice line about this. He said, "Restraint of sense desire enables us to verify its empty nature." So we see it's just a cloud that arises, moves us, and then passes. And it's through practicing restraint or renunciation that we can verify that transitory nature.

The second of the kinds of craving the Buddha talked about is craving for existence. The Pali term here is *bhava-taṇhā*. *Bhava* is a word that means existence, sometimes translated as being, sometimes translated as becoming. It's a very interesting term. The basic meaning of craving for existence means we want to be here in this body, alive in this realm, because it is this existence that allows access to the contact of the five realms of sense objects. So it's because of this deep-seated longing for existence that we have a fear of dying.

And the fear of dying, I think, is way out of proportion to the reality of dying. And that's what lets us know that there's this irrational longing at the base. Because think about dying. Suppose you went to bed tonight and you simply did not wake up in the morning.

I mean, would that really be a problem for you? And yet, if we knew that was going to happen, we'd be terrified—because of this craving for existence.

So, you know, the actual end, if it came to the end of this body and the end of this mind stream and the end of this flow of sense experience, what's the big deal? And yet we have a deep, deep dread of that, the greatest disaster imaginable in our life. That's the craving for existence.

The other aspect of it is a craving to become something. A psychological level of *bhava* is becoming something. In my early years of retreat, when I was younger, I'd spend a lot of time thinking about where I wanted to live and what work I wanted to do and what kind of community I wanted to connect to, and what kind of partner I might want to connect with. And I came to see that all of that was searching for some kind of identity that would give me a security that I didn't have. I was in the middle of meditation, seeing the groundless nature of everything that was arising and passing. And I was thinking that becoming somebody would give me a different kind of security, a solidity, a safe identity.

So take a look. A lot of the fantasies that we go through, future fantasies that we go through on retreat, are really driven by this *bhava taṇhā*, desire for becoming something. But of course, we need to keep in mind the advice of Lily Tomlin, who commented in one of her plays, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, something like that—she said, "I always knew I wanted to be someone, but I guess I should have been more specific."

The third aspect of craving is called the craving for non-existence. The Pali is *vibhava taṇhā*. And the basic meaning is that although we have this deep desire to exist, which got us here in the first place, we also have at times a desire not to exist at all. Basically a desire to turn off the impingement—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, moods, emotions, and so on. We have a desire to get away from it all. And sometimes the mere fact of living in phenomenal existence is experienced as a huge and oppressive burden, full of pain and darkness. It's out of this mood of *vibhava taṇhā* that people commit suicide, imagining that that is really going to solve the problem.

So there's a kind of aversion to life that's this manifestation of not wanting to exist, wanting not to exist. It also means wanting to get rid of what is unpleasant. When you find a painful sensation in the knee and you find yourself thinking, "I wish I could get rid of this," that's also a manifestation of wanting it not to exist. So this is the aversion aspect of the tendency of mind.

That's a description of the second noble truth.

Then, as you know, each noble truth comes with a prescription, an advice for action. The Buddha said with the second noble truth: this noble truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned. So the instruction is that craving is to be abandoned. This means both momentarily—each time it arises, it needs to be abandoned—and finally, that as we walk the path to its very end, we are meant to abandon it once and for all.

I think most of us know that this is a good idea, but actually doing it is not that easy. How many times have you found yourself recognizing that there's some form of greed, aversion, or delusion going on and not being able to release it? Ajahn Chah said that seventy to eighty percent of spiritual life is knowing that we're clinging and not being able to let go. So if that's seventy to eighty percent of your experience, you're at an Ajahn Chah level.

We've talked about a lot of tools for how to let go—noting the presence of greed, aversion, or delusion, noting the feeling tone on which they're based, many ways of working with the various forms of hindrances. I'm not going to talk about that more. But what I would like to encourage you to do is, once you notice a movement of greed or aversion, to stay with it and watch its changing nature. None of them are permanent. And it's very interesting to be committed to follow one all the way through.

This is from the start of the *Xin Xin Ming*, the Verses on the Faith Mind, which I'm sure you've heard before: "The great way is not difficult for those who have no preferences. When love and hate are both absent, everything becomes clear and undisguised. Make the smallest distinction, however, and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart."

That means even a slight bit of greed or aversion separates heaven from us. Notice this. There's a big difference in feeling when—let's just take aversion—when aversion is strong and aversion is weak. There's a big difference in that. Quantitatively, it's the same thing, but there's a big qualitative gap. But then watch what happens when aversion goes out of the picture altogether. That's not just a quantitative shift. That's a qualitative shift. When greed, aversion, and delusion are all absent, there are no preferences. Heaven and earth are no longer separated.

See what that feels like. Be willing to track the diminishment of greed or aversion until it goes completely away.

And see what that is like for it to pass altogether.

It's really in the abandoning of these forces that we are led directly into the third noble truth. It is in the understanding of unsatisfactoriness and the abandoning of craving that we shift our whole relationship to pain and suffering in our life. As one teacher said, our practice is to change the conditions that lead to suffering. There is no other practice.

I want to close with two quotes from the Buddha—one showing the magnitude of the situation that we're in, the other pointing the way forward.

Saṃsāra means the round of birth and death that we have been on. "This saṃsāra is without a discernible beginning. A first point is not evident of beings roaming and wandering on, clouded by ignorance and driven by craving."

That is our situation. This has been our condition, the Buddha is saying here, since beginningless time.

And the only way out is this third noble truth: "This is the noble truth of the end of suffering. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishment of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it."

We'll talk about that in a later talk. So let's just sit together for a minute.

This saṃsāra is without a discernible beginning. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on, clouded by ignorance and driven by craving.

CHAPTER 39

Guided Meditation - Muditā

Sally Armstrong · 46 min

> *In this guided meditation from the 2007 IMS Three-Month Retreat, Sally Armstrong introduces muditā, the brahmavihāra of sympathetic or empathetic joy. She illuminates how muditā fits beautifully within the arc of the four divine abodes—following mettā and karuṇā (compassion), muditā provides essential balance by deliberately turning toward joy and appreciation rather than dwelling solely on suffering. This prevents the heaviness that can arise from intensive compassion practice.*
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> *Armstrong explores the subtleties of muditā practice with characteristic clarity, discussing both its near enemy (exuberance, where thinking proliferates into fantasy and craving) and its far enemy (envy, rooted in the contracted belief that others' happiness diminishes our own). She shares the Dalai Lama's insight that opening to others' happiness multiplies our own possibilities for joy by billions. The practice begins with a "happy person"—someone whose life is visibly going well—then extends to oneself (as a form of gratitude), the benefactor, and eventually all beings.*
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> *The meditation offers practical phrases including the traditional "May your happiness and good fortune continue, may they increase and never wane," while emphasizing the importance of staying grounded in bodily experience rather than intellectual repetition. Armstrong encourages practitioners to notice small moments of joy—a dog playing in snow, a shared sunset—as genuine expressions of muditā, training the mind to incline toward beauty and appreciation as a counterbalance to the letting-go emphasis common in insight practice.*

Tonight we're going to introduce the Brahma Vihara of Muditā, which is usually translated as sympathetic or empathetic joy—joy in the happiness of others. Though I think many of us like to also include the possibility of appreciating our own sense of joy. Consider that an important part of this practice as a balancing to the difficult states of mind that we can often experience in our life and particularly on retreat.

There's a beautiful arc to the development of the Brahma Viharas, such wisdom in the way they are presented to us, beginning with the foundation practice of mettā that introduces this very simple yet profound act of caring for ourselves and others and invites the possibility of an open and loving heart. Then we move into compassion, because what we recognize as that heart opens is that there is suffering, as much as we

might wish for others to be happy. We look around and we see in others' lives and certainly in our own life all the different ways that we suffer, that there is suffering. And so this responsive heart naturally develops compassion, opens to compassion.

But if we just stayed there, even that beautiful quality, that beautiful bittersweet quality of compassion, can lead us to only open to a certain portion of our experience as human beings. It's necessary to balance it with this appreciation of joy. Compassion is a beautiful quality, but if we're only looking for the suffering, looking for what's difficult, we can get weighed down with that. There actually can be imbalance in that.

And so to then open up, out of a recognition of the pervasiveness of suffering, to take that wisdom, that knowledge, and turn it deliberately and directly to the expression of joy brings a wonderful uplift and balance to our hearts and our practice. A very wise movement. And then, of course, the last Brahma Vihara is that which holds everything —equanimity, or upekkhā, which we will begin next week.

It's often said that this Brahma Vihara is actually the most difficult to practice. And it's interesting because we would all probably think, "Joy, that sounds good. I'll sign up for that." But we have so many conscious and unconscious ideas about what joy or happiness is. I think one of the things that's necessary to explore in all of these Brahma Viharas is: what is it we're actually wishing for? What is true joy or happiness for us? What does it actually look like or feel like? We must question some of the more superficial ways in which we might have understood joy or happiness in the past and really begin to get in touch with the source of true happiness or true joy for ourselves and for others. So it's not a superficial practice.

I can remember doing some intensive muditā practice for a number of days at a stretch. It's very light. Especially when I was practicing all the Brahma Viharas intensively, to come out of that somewhat heavy nature of compassion and switch to muditā —I felt like skipping around the retreat center, which is not very appropriate, if you've noticed. People don't tend to skip too much around here. But it had that lightness, that ebullience to it that was really quite wonderful.

This is why the near enemy of muditā is exuberance. It's an interesting take on this quality of mind, of joy, to see the near enemy as exuberance. I really see it playing out as its near enemy when we get into too much thinking. The expression of joy, the experience of joy, can be quite present and alive in this moment, appreciative. But the mind takes over and says, "Boy, isn't this great? Only if there were more of it, and tomorrow, and the next day, and when I get home, and what about this, and I can do this." The

thinking takes off and just leads us into amping up our mental energy around the possibility of getting more and more. That's how the near enemy of joy can play out. It's really interesting to look for in the practice.

The near enemies, as you know, are the expressions of heart or mind that masquerade as the true quality of the Brahma Vihara. We can be fooled by them. But if you're sensitive, you can tell when you move out of that direct connection with a sense of appreciation and into a lot of thinking and fantasizing about whatever might be happening. So watch out for the near enemy.

When we begin the muditā practice, we introduce a new person into the range of people we've currently been working with, and that is a person we know reasonably well, whose life is going well, who when we think of them we can have a sense that there are many blessings in their life. Whatever things are important to them—work, relationship, family, creativity, their body, whatever it might be—there's a sense that things are going in the right direction. You might want to be thinking as I'm talking, not thinking too much, but just letting come to you who might be good to play this role for your practice of muditā.

As we look around at our circle of friends, of course we see a range of happiness and suffering in each person's life. It's not about looking for someone who only has happiness; I think that's fairly impossible. But we look for someone who, when we think of them, we can connect with a certain area of their life where there's a great degree of satisfaction or ease or peace. It could be in a specific area of their creativity, even if other parts of their life might have some challenge to them, but you can tune into that. That's what we want to look for to begin this practice—someone you can think of and fairly easily open to this expression of joy and appreciation of their happiness.

The far enemy of muditā is obviously its opposite: envy. It's interesting how even though we may not think this is an emotion we often feel, as we do the practice, what can come up for us is this belief, this sense of limitation that's quite deep for many of us—that if they have X or Y or whatever, it means there's less for me. It's interesting how pervasive this belief can be, even though your rational mind might tell you that this is not so.

There's just this underlying tendency of contraction around how we will be held in the world. And so it's quite natural, actually insightful, for this movement of mind to come up—the comparing, the separating, the contraction around wanting to wish someone else well. It's really helpful to see it, to see if you can soften around it, to feel

the suffering nature of that contraction and the way it brings in a sense of limitation. And of course, to realize that it's not true—that there isn't any way someone else's happiness diminishes your own.

Actually, if you're able to open to and appreciate the happiness of others, it multiplies your possibility for happiness. We always trot out this line because it's so helpful to put it in perspective: the Dalai Lama says if you can be happy at the happiness of others, your possibility for happiness goes up by six billion to one. However many people are out there, if you can find happiness in some of them, then there's a greater possibility of your own happiness. So really hold that perspective as we do this practice.

But if you find this sense of limitation coming up, be willing to open to it and explore what's underlying it. Really question this belief that says, "I'll have less if they have more," and see that you can actually enliven your own sense of well-being by connecting in this powerful way with someone else.

When we talk about this kind of joy, it can invite in us a different way of looking at our experience. So often in our practice we can have the lens or inclination of mind to notice things that are actually quite challenging to open to—suffering, impermanence, emptiness, a lot of letting go, letting go, letting go. Very powerful insights can come from that kind of practice.

This is where the practice of mudita can be a really helpful balance: to see that in the same way, you can incline your mind to noticing what's beautiful in your own experience and in the expressions of other people's lives, and really let that lift your spirits up. We're making choices all the time about what we're noticing. If what you're seeing is everything that's unpleasant, that's what will color your experience and your mind states. If you actually incline the mind to notice what's beautiful, see what happens. It gladdens the mind, gladdens the heart, to see that this is possible.

And I know for myself, and I'm sure you do too, the power of this inclining of the mind—you've seen it through your metta practice. As you come back again and again to this sense of well-wishing, even if it seems artificial in the beginning, over time it actually does incline the mind toward well-wishing and toward happiness. The same can happen with mudita practice.

I think it's wonderful that we're doing this practice today. How many people felt happy seeing the snow? And how many people felt happy seeing someone else happy at the snow? I walked out at lunchtime and was lucky enough to take Bob, the director's dog, out for a little play on the lawn outside. He just ran out into the snow and sort of spread-eagled and dove into it, coming up with a big muzzle full of snow. It lifted my

spirit so much to see him so happy. I made little snowballs and threw them, and he chased them and slid. It was just great—I picked up so much happiness from his exuberance in being in the snow.

We can look for little things. This isn't about the joy to end all joys, but really these small moments of contact we can have within ourselves or as we see others experiencing a beautiful sunset, when we often all stand out there knowing that we're sharing this beautiful, ephemeral display of color, and that everyone's heart is being touched in some way. So really look for not extreme gradations of this, but just the very subtle moments of appreciation. And let that in.

There can sometimes be a kind of insular nature to practice on retreat. We wrap up in our shawls and creep around, keeping our eyes down, trying to navigate without letting anyone else in. Mudita practice says let them in. Really see if you can find the beauty and the joy in every person's expression here. It's just a different way of relating to our practice on retreat, and obviously we can take this out into the world.

So we'll begin—actually not in the usual way. We're beginning by bringing to mind this person you've chosen to send mudita to, and then we'll go to ourselves. Even though it's not actually traditional to do mudita for ourselves, we'll do some, and then we'll go to the benefactor. I think that will be enough for tonight. You can use the same person you have as your benefactor.

It can be interesting to find your way into that different relationship with whoever you're working with. Sometimes people feel a sense of inadequacy around this person: "Who am I to be talking about their happiness? They're so happy already." But that's part of the practice—being willing to open to joy in all its forms and not using this in any way to diminish our own capacity for joy.

The phrases we use for mudita—I'll suggest a few. The traditional one has two parts: "May your happiness and good fortune continue. May they increase and never wane." It has this sense of acknowledging happiness, well-being, good fortune, and wishing that it continues to grow, that it doesn't diminish, that all it does is keep getting deeper and bigger for this person. So that's the traditional phrase.

May your happiness and good fortune continue. May they increase and never wane. You simply repeat these phrases again and again.

There are some variations you might find speak to you more directly: "May your happiness and good fortune never leave you." Or simply, "May your joy and happiness continue." Something along those lines. Or even just, "I'm happy that you're happy." You can choose whichever works best for you.

Keeping it simple—may your happiness and good fortune never leave you—and really feeling into the response in the heart as you say that, as you offer this message. A real sense of support and encouragement and well-wishing to this person you've chosen, noticing what response arises in your own heart and mind.

We'll begin the practice by taking a moment to connect with your own current experience. I've said quite a few words about the practice, which may have brought up some response in you—interest, willingness, excitement, or perhaps a sense of contraction or sadness. Just notice whatever is there and let it be just as it is. Perhaps use the breath to open to the energy in the body, to be more directly in contact with what's happening for you here and now.

With all of the brahma viharas, I think it's really helpful to keep our practice based in the body so it doesn't become an intellectual pursuit, a mere repetition of words. If you find it helpful, center your attention in the center of the chest and notice what's present there, without expectation or judgment.

Then bring into your awareness this person you've chosen as your happy person. Take a few moments to really connect with them, particularly with what it is about their being or their life that you know brings them great joy, where things are going well. The practice is to keep coming back to that. Other thoughts or memories may arise—things that are difficult for this person—so we acknowledge those. We don't deny them. But the training is to return to this intention of connecting with joy, with happiness, with good fortune. Each of the brahma viharas is a particular training.

Let their whole situation unfold in your inner awareness, particularly noticing what brings them joy. It can be helpful to imagine them in that place or situation where you know they're quite happy—with the people they're happy with, whatever it is. Imagine them smiling, engaged, playful, however you relate to them and can invoke this feeling of sympathetic joy. Let it resonate in your own heart.

Then begin saying the phrases of mudita for this person: May your happiness and good fortune continue. May they increase and never wane. May your happiness and good fortune never leave you. I'm happy that you're happy.

Mudita is a practice where you can really let yourself smile a little as you connect with this sense of joy and appreciation.

Now let go of this person you've been practicing with and begin to turn the mudita toward yourself. When we practice mudita in this way, it's really much more like gratitude—a willingness to acknowledge the blessings in our life. Not to diminish the places

of struggle or difficulty, but simply to find a way to connect with those areas in your experience—even if small or fleeting—where you find a sense of joy, a sense of lightness.

Using the same phrases for yourself as you did for the friend: May my happiness and good fortune continue. May they increase and never wane. May my happiness and good fortune never leave me. Really be open to exploring this aspect of joy in your life, seeing how inclining the mind in this way brings the possibility of appreciation and gratitude alive. But if there is any sense of constriction, be willing to notice that as well. See if it's possible to come back to any degree of connection to the happiness or gratitude you can find.

Now turn the focus of your practice to the benefactor, this person toward whom you've cultivated both metta and compassion. Look particularly for what you know is beautiful in their life—things they enjoy, places of happiness. Take a moment to really connect with them. Out of the whole tapestry that is their life, pick out those threads you know bring them joy. If it's not someone you know very well, trust your intuition about that. Use the same phrases toward this person as you've used for the others.

I encourage you to take at least another session of mudita practice and move through the remaining categories you're familiar with—the friend, the neutral person—seeing if there's any possibility of practicing with a difficult person, pushing that boundary or barrier a little. And then, of course, opening up to all beings.

It can be a challenging practice in those later categories, so just see what's possible for you without any agenda. Like the other brahma viharas, if you wish to continue in a more concentrated way, dedicate at least one sitting or walking period in the coming days to this practice. In those sessions, you might want to focus just on the happy person and yourself, or find some balance that really speaks to you and uplifts the heart.

It can be a beautiful thing to bring into your life, both in a formal way through dedicated practice, but of course, to also have it become a natural response that arises spontaneously.

If you notice that someone else is really appreciating a bowl of hot soup, or as I mentioned, the sunset, or whatever simple pleasure they're enjoying, just allow yourself to feel that sense of joy, letting it actually touch your heart in that beautiful way.

May your happiness and good fortune continue.

CHAPTER 40

Self and Selflessness

Joseph Goldstein · 1h01

> *In this profound dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein addresses the Buddha's most radical and liberating teaching: anattā (selflessness or non-self). While many aspects of Buddhist teaching align with common sense—non-harming, impermanence, the relationship between clinging and suffering—the understanding that there is no substantial self behind experience represents a fundamental shift in how we perceive reality.*
>
> *Goldstein draws on Abhidhamma psychology to explain how perception (saññā) functions as a mental factor that recognizes, names, and remembers experience. When perception operates without mindfulness, we become trapped by concepts—mistaking the frame for the picture. Through vivid personal anecdotes and examples ranging from colonialism to rainbow physics, he demonstrates how our mental constructs of place, ideology, ownership, time, self-image, and ultimately 'self' create division and suffering. The teaching from the Dhammapada is highlighted: 'Let go of the past, let go of the future, let go of the present and cross over to the further shore.'*
>
> *The talk explores how we construct selfhood through identification with body, thoughts, emotions, and consciousness itself. Using the Buddha's teaching to Rāhula—'This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself'—as a contemplative mantra, Goldstein points toward the liberating recognition that what we call 'self' is like a rainbow: an appearance arising from conditions, beautiful but insubstantial. Stories of Dīpā Mā's psychic abilities illustrate what becomes possible when identification with the solid body dissolves. The talk concludes with Kalu Rinpoche's teaching: 'When we understand this, we see we are nothing, and being nothing, we are everything.'*

So many aspects of the Buddha's teachings about the nature of suffering and about the possibilities of happiness and freedom resonate very easily with our common sense understanding of things, our common sense view of ourselves and the world. For example, the importance of non-harming as the basic moral principle of living in community, whether locally or globally. This is easy to understand. It makes sense. The understanding that everything in our lives is changing and that the more we cling, the more we're attached to that which in its nature is going to change, the more we'll suffer. Again, that's not difficult to comprehend.

But there's one aspect of the teaching that offers a profoundly different view of ourselves and of the world, one that changes our entire worldview. It's this understanding that makes the Buddha's enlightenment such a remarkable accomplishment in all of the spiritual cultures of awakening. This is the deep understanding and realization of selflessness or emptiness—in Pali, anatta. It is the understanding and realization of the insubstantiality of all phenomena. This is the great liberating jewel of the Buddha's teaching.

As our awareness, the observing power of the mind, becomes stronger and steadier and clearer, we see for ourselves that the self is not what we thought it to be. We begin to experience that the body is not self, that thoughts are not self, that emotions are not self, that even awareness, consciousness, is not self. We begin to see that this notion of self, this very deeply rooted notion, is a concept. It's a mental construction. It's a mental fabrication.

The Austrian philosopher who taught for many years in Britain, Wittgenstein, really captured the essence of this. He said, "The sense of a separate self is only a shadow cast by grammar." There's something very profound in that. We have created this concept through grammar.

Beginning to understand that self is a mental construct, that it's a fabrication of mind, sometimes comes as a great surprise, but it can also be a great relief. All those troubling aspects of one's personality with which you're becoming very familiar, and all the wonderful qualities—they don't belong to anyone. They are simply experiences. They are appearances arising out of changing conditions.

One Sri Lankan monk really summed up the great liberating power of understanding anatta. He said, "No self, no problem." That's the promise of this realization.

So tonight I'd like to speak about how the mind creates this very deeply conditioned concept of self, and how we can free ourselves from this great illusion.

The Abhidhamma, the Buddhist psychology, provides a very clear template of understanding. There are things we've mentioned before, so this is just a bit of a brief review. In Buddhist psychology, mind refers to the knowing faculty, that faculty which knows—knows a sight, a sound, a smell, a taste, sensation in the body, knows a thought. This knowing faculty is called consciousness: seeing consciousness, hearing consciousness, smelling consciousness, and so forth.

But what we call mind in English is also more than this simple bare knowing. It's more than this simple knowing faculty, because in each moment of consciousness, in each moment of knowing, there arise in different combinations a variety of mental

factors. They arise in every moment of knowing and color the consciousness according to their own particular function. Greed colors the mind, colors consciousness in a particular way. Hatred colors consciousness in a particular way. Mindfulness, concentration, love, joy, wisdom, equanimity, restlessness—each one of these are factors of mind doing their own work; they have their own nature.

Now some of these factors of mind lead to happiness, and they're called wholesome. Some of these factors of mind lead to suffering, and they're called unwholesome. This is a pretty interesting designation, and it points to the very pragmatic nature of Buddhist ethics. Buddhist ethics is not about commandments. It's not "thou shall not do this" or "thou shall not do that." It's about understanding that this leads to suffering, this leads to happiness. Please take your pick.

So there's the simplicity of bare knowing, colored by a wide variety of mental factors, all arising and passing moment to moment in different combinations. Now there's one particular factor of mind which is common to every moment of consciousness—it's called a common factor—which, when out of balance with the others, keeps us imprisoned in the world of concepts, keeps us imprisoned in the world of self, in the conventional idea of self.

It's important to understand how this factor works, and it is the factor of perception.

In the Abhidhamma, perception is defined quite carefully. It's that quality or factor of mind which recognizes, names, and then remembers each arising object. For example, we hear a sound. Consciousness simply knows—hearing. Perception will pick out the distinguishing marks of that sound, recognize it as "bird," name it with the concept, and then store it in memory so that when we hear that sound again, it recognizes it, re-cognizes it. "Oh, bird, that's a bird." That's the function of perception.

When perception is in balance with mindfulness, it's like putting a frame around a picture. We put a frame around the picture in order to focus our attention on the picture—it helps us focus. When perception is in balance with mindfulness, perception is like the frame; we're recognizing what's there, and that recognition can help us be deeply mindful of the experience.

But when there's perception without mindfulness, perception without awareness—which is very often our usual way of being in the world, perceiving all the time without awareness—then we know and recognize and remember only the very superficial aspects of what's happening. Mindfulness looks deeply into it. Perception is just the sur-

face recognition. So it's more like we're looking at the frame rather than the picture. We give a name or a concept to an experience and then become limited by the name, by the concept.

A story I've told often illustrates this so beautifully, in a rather sad way. This was told to me by a friend of mine years ago. He had a little boy in the second grade or so, and the teacher asked the class, "What color are apples?" Everybody said red, or green, or golden. This little boy raised his hand and said, "White." The teacher said, "Apples aren't white. They're red, they're green, they're golden." But this little kid was very insistent—"No, they're white." The teacher was getting just as insistent—"No, they're not." They went back and forth a little bit, and finally, out of great frustration, the kid said, "If you cut the apple open, what's the color inside? It's white." But it was a little out of the box. What color are apples? Red. And then we can get so fixated on the concept that we actually don't look into the situation more deeply, more clearly.

Our perceptions—that is, the concepts with which we overlay experience—often condition the way we feel about things. The particular concepts we have about experience condition how we feel. And one of the things you may have been noticing is that very often they're inaccurate. We're not perceiving correctly.

Years ago, I was on a retreat here with Sayadaw U Pandita. As most of you know, he was a very demanding teacher. It was a very rigorous course—everybody was sleeping only four hours a night. I had to report to him every day about my experience, and everything was very pressured. We were not in the era of relaxed practice.

So I was doing walking meditation right outside here, just walking, and I glanced up at room 107 and saw him looking down at me, watching me walk. I kind of got myself together and started walking even slower, pretending to be mindful. Lifting, moving, placing. Then I look up—he's still looking. So again, I'm... And this went on for I don't know how long—ten minutes, fifteen minutes, twenty minutes—each time I would look up. And then I thought, "Why is he watching me for so long?" Because it really had an effect.

I had this whole emotional reaction about his watching me. And then I looked more carefully, and it wasn't Sayadaw U Pandita at all. It was a lampshade.

I had just made up this whole story with its attendant feelings and emotions. That's perception run amok.

We can see this tendency of how perception conditions our world, how it often limits our understanding and can solidify our sense of how things are through the concepts we employ in many areas of our lives. And sometimes, if we're not discerning, there can be very harmful consequences when we don't see how this is working.

Let me give you some basic examples—major concepts, perceptions which we employ in the world. We have many concepts of place: the world, the earth, divided into nations, into countries. How many wars have been fought over boundaries? Are these boundaries real, or are they constructs? Mental constructs? One of the really inspiring things from those early astronauts in space was the almost mystical vision they had when they saw the Earth from above as a unity—the sense of all those separations falling away. It was a transforming experience, because most of us are so lost in this way of understanding the world, divided by concept.

Concepts of ideology are a huge source of suffering. Just the most blatant ones—there are endless examples, but consider recent ones: the creation of the concept of "the axis of evil." This country is okay, that one is the axis of evil. And looking the other way, "the great Satan." It's no wonder what is derived from those concepts, if one really believes them and gets caught by them. A whole view of the world is created by concept, by perception.

There are the concepts of ownership, of possessiveness. Again, sometimes there's a huge amount of suffering that comes from this concept. Just look at the legacy in this country of slavery. One hundred fifty, two hundred years ago, and we are still in the midst of the suffering of that legacy—the idea that somebody could own somebody else. That was just a construct of the mind, a perception that people got totally lost in. Or we see it today in the effects of colonialism. So much of the suffering in the Middle East stems from colonialism and the artificial boundaries of nations.

So this is consequential. This is not just some interesting philosophic point. When we don't understand how perception works in the mind, how it creates concepts and how we get caught and identified with these concepts, it has huge consequences.

On a much simpler level, but one that reveals how deeply this attachment goes—this construct, this perception of ownership and possessiveness—how would you feel if you walked into the hall and somebody was sitting in your seat? I'll bet it would be a moment. I'll bet something would go through the mind: "How could they be sitting in *my* seat?" And the Buddha talked of how we can't even be said to own this mind and body, much less anything else.

There's a beautiful little haiku poem by Ryokan, that great Zen master, poet, hermit, wanderer. He was very poor. He lived up in the mountains, just had this little hut in the mountains of Japan. He'd go out and play with the village children and wander the mountain paths. He had almost nothing. Then one day he came back to his hut and found that the few little possessions he had were stolen. They were gone.

So what did he do? He wrote a poem: "The moon at the window—the thief left it behind."

Now, let's do a little thought experiment. Imagine going home. Everything is stolen. "Oh, the moon at the window. The thief left it behind." I don't think so. Because we're pretty attached to the idea that we own things and that they're ours.

These go deep. We take them to be reality, when really they're the product of a concept, a certain kind of perception.

One that affects us even more than all of these—deeply conditioned—is the concept of time. The concept of past, of future. It's very interesting to examine and investigate: How do we actually experience the past? Not as a concept, as a construct, but how do we actually experience it?

We have certain thoughts or images. They're memories, remembrances, recollections of things that have happened. So we have certain thoughts or images, possibly emotions associated with them, arising in the moment. We perceive them. We make a concept about those kinds of thoughts or images—the concept of past. And then here's the interesting part: there's some kind of mental gymnastic involved, where we take this concept which we have just created and somehow toss it out behind us, as if it has a reality back there someplace.

We do the same thing with future. We're just sitting here minding our own business, watching the breath, and we have certain thoughts—imagining, anticipation, planning, fantasy. Thoughts or images arise, and we recognize them through perception. We make a concept about that category of thoughts—future—and then toss this concept out ahead of us, as if the future is out there waiting for us.

Not to get into the metaphysics of time—I'm talking in a very pragmatic way. What is our experience of past and future? Our experience of it is as a thought in the moment. It's the only way we experience it. And yet, if we don't see that, it's as if we are carrying the concepts of past and future on our shoulders, taking them to be a reality. It's like carrying two mountains around.

How much of the time that you've spent here has been lost in past, lost in future? With all of the emotions and all of the stories, it's huge. We spend our lives like this. It's no wonder we're tired—because we're carrying this huge burden. And all it is, is a concept.

This is not difficult to see. This doesn't take forty years of meditation. It's just paying attention to how the mind is doing this in the moment. See for yourselves. Watch what happens as these different kinds of thoughts arise. The concept of past and future weighs very heavily in our lives. It's a huge burden. A thought in the moment is very light. Really light. Just a momentary plan, a momentary memory. It's not a problem when we see it clearly.

Saint Augustine had a nice little quip about this. He said, "If the past and future really exist, where are they?" And it's pointing just to this experience.

We can see very often how these concepts of past and future condition how we feel, because they usually carry a lot of emotional baggage. We can see this very precisely on retreat—just watch the time thoughts about the retreat and notice the difference in how it makes you feel. You're sitting or walking and the thought may come: "Oh, three and a half more weeks left, four weeks left. I'll never make it. How many more sittings? How many more walks?"

What just happened? It was a thought. Just a thought. But because we created that concept of future, we jumped right into that little cartoon bubble and got burdened by it.

Or we might have the thought "a month left" and great, a month left, a month left to practice. It might affect us that way. We want to see it for what it is, and it's hugely liberating.

Now we get to something interesting, because not only is the past a concept, and not only is the future a concept—the present is a concept as well. We can create the concept of the present moment and become just as attached and fixated on the present as on the past and future. This, in fact, is an occupational hazard of meditators, because all of the instructions are: be in the present, stay connected to the present moment, be mindful of the present. And so all of the messages help to reinforce the notion that the present is the reality.

There's a well-known Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa, who wrote a poem that really captured my attention. The title of the poem, which is also the first line, says: "Live, you say, in the present." So I thought, I'll read on. "Live, you say, in the present.

Live only in the present. But I don't want the present. I want reality." That was a powerful line. And the whole poem goes on to say how all of time is a construct—past, future, present.

The Buddha highlighted this in a very powerful teaching. This is from the Dhammapada, and this is a teaching that could enlighten one. If we really took it in. Listen. This is your chance. Yes. "Let go of the past. Let go of the future. Let go of the present and cross over to the further shore. With the mind wholly liberated, you go beyond birth and death."

So what does that mean, let go of the present? You might practice with that. As you're sitting, what does that mean? What's the experience? Let go of the present.

So there are concepts of place, of ideology, of ownership, of time. Lots of concepts of self-image. We just create images of ourselves, personas that we present to the world, that we present to ourselves. They can be worldly self-images, they can be spiritual self-images. How often do we get caught in the good yogi, bad yogi syndrome, where we create an image of ourselves as being a good yogi or a bad yogi, and then compare that to others and project that same syndrome onto others? It's all a concept. It's all a mental construct. It has nothing to do with anything.

I had a particularly vivid illustration of this. Again, this was that first year practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita. This was a three-month retreat, and after a few weeks, I saw all the yogis who seemed quite impeccable—you know who they are—really being mindful and attentive, the good yogis. And I saw, after a while, they all had little notebooks and they were writing things down. And then I thought to myself, "Oh, those are the good yogis. Sayadaw U Pandita must have given them a special teaching. He didn't tell me about that." And I felt terrible, you know, not having measured up.

Then a few weeks went by, and I saw the kind of casual yogis, you know, those who were a little sloppy in their practice. And they had little notebooks too. Then I thought, "Oh, well, my practice must be so good that Sayadaw U Pandita thinks I don't need a notebook." And so my mind was just going back and forth.

Good yogi, bad yogi. At the end of the retreat, I discovered that Sayadaw U Pandita hadn't said anything about notebooks to anybody. People had simply wanted to write down a few notes about their practice for their interviews. And I had made up this whole story all about self-image—spiritual self-image—a complete mental construction that had nothing to do with anything else.

It's interesting to look at some things that seem even more fundamental to us and see them in the light of perception and concepts: age and gender, race and culture. I have a few questions for you. What color is awareness? How old is your breath? Is the pain in the knee male or female? Is anger Eastern or Western, American, Burmese?

It's not to say that these concepts don't point to certain things in our experience, because obviously they do. And all of the concepts I've mentioned have their uses. So I'm not suggesting that we throw out the world of concepts. What I am suggesting is that we understand deeply that they are only concepts, and we don't confuse them with the underlying reality.

When we don't connect with the underlying realities, when we get identified in one way or another with the concept of age or race or culture or gender—and again, they do point to differences of experience—but when we get identified with the concept and miss the underlying realities, then we are setting ourselves up for divisiveness and conflict.

The deepest conditioning and habit of mind, the root source of so much suffering in ourselves and in the world, is the attachment we have to the concept of self. Self is another concept, a mental construct, just like all of these others. It is the idea that there is someone behind experience to whom the experience is happening. We create in our minds a reference point for all experience and then designate that reference point with the mental concept of self or I.

I want to talk a little bit about how this happens. We become attached to and identified with the idea of self because we rely on and are satisfied with a superficial perception. Self is like the frame—there's a superficial perception, we give a name, and then we get caught by the name. We get up in the morning, look in the mirror, recognize a certain appearance, and create a concept designating what we see: Joseph, self, I, me. And then we don't look more deeply to really understand what is actually there. We're satisfied with the superficial perception. Yep, that's me.

Let me give you an example of this. After a rainstorm, when the conditions are right and the sun comes out, we often see a rainbow. We see the rainbow, it's beautiful, and for most people we just feel happy. We see a rainbow and we smile. Usually we stay satisfied with the superficial perception—oh, that's a rainbow. We have that concept designating the experience, and we might begin to think that rainbow is actually a thing in itself.

But what is a rainbow? A rainbow is an appearance that comes out of certain conditions coming together—light and air and moisture. When these conditions come together in a certain way, a rainbow appears. It's an appearance arising out of changing conditions, but the rainbow is not a substantial thing.

Self—Joseph, each one of us—is like that rainbow. Now, it doesn't mean that we don't see what we see. We do see a rainbow, but we can understand it as being an appearance rather than attributing some substantiality, some self-existence to it, which it does not have.

Likewise, we look in the mirror or we look at our lives and we see a pattern of appearances—the pattern of this physical body, the pattern of emotions and thoughts—and we give a designation to it: self, Joseph. All those things are there and we recognize the patterns. That is our very conventional understanding. But then we get fooled into thinking that the designation we give to it—Joseph, self, I—actually refers to something substantial in and of itself, as opposed to being a designation for an appearance, a pattern arising out of all these changing conditions.

How much of our sense of self comes from the superficial perception we have of this body? It seems so solid, so me. Some time ago I saw an advertisement in the New York Times for a t-shirt, and the logo, the words on the t-shirt, said: me, me, me.

So I thought we should have a meditator's t-shirt: not me, not me, not me.

When we observe the body more closely—yes, on a superficial perception there's the body, this is me, this is Joseph—but when we observe it more closely, we use the concept, the perception of body, as the frame to then look at the experience more deeply. What is it that we discover? What we're calling body is just a lot of interrelated systems. There's the circulatory system and the skeletal system and all the organs and everything that goes into making what we call the body.

We probably, if we were seeing it with clarity, wouldn't identify with the gallbladder and say, "Yes, gallbladder is me." If we saw the gallbladder: "Yep, that's me." Probably not. Liver, small intestines—no. But somehow we wrap it all nicely in skin, make a nice little package of it. "Yep, that's me." Because we're just not seeing deeply enough or clearly enough.

And when we don't see it deeply and clearly, as we know, it's very easy to get attached to it. If we had x-ray vision, how attached would we be to either our body or other people's bodies? I don't know.

And of course the corollary of attachment to the body—and this doesn't have to do with not appreciating it or taking care of it or all the things that are valuable to do—but attachment to it as being self, what's the corollary to that? Fear of losing it. If we are living in this view that this body is who I am, the inevitable corollary is fear of losing it, fear of death.

Of course, if we come down to a much more refined level, a molecular level or atomic level, as I'm told—I haven't seen it, but as I've read—it's mostly empty space. And all of the matter that comprises the body, I read someplace that all the matter, if you take the space away, is no bigger than a particle of dust. Even if it's several particles of dust—so what are we attached to? What are we identifying with? It's because we're not seeing deeply enough.

In meditation, as awareness gets stronger, we go from the perception of the body as something solid that we can and do easily identify with, to the experience of it for ourselves. We really begin to experience it as a fluid energy field which loses all that sense of solidity, and there's much less identification with it at that time.

I want to read some fun stories about how when we're not fixated and attached to the notion of the solidity of the body as being I, as being self, many things are possible. These are just some stories from the book about Dipa Ma, who I think we've spoken of over the years—this amazingly wonderful teacher in Calcutta who was an extraordinary yogi with the highest attainments in both vipassanā and samatha concentration practice, including psychic powers.

These are some of the things she did with her great power of concentration and absorption. And these are pretty classic—you can read about how these powers work in the texts.

Once Munindra—Munindra was both my first teacher and also Dipa Ma's teacher—once Munindra was in his room when he noticed something unusual in the sky outside his window. He looked out and saw Dipa Ma in the air near the tops of the trees, grinning at him and playing in a room she had built in the sky. By changing the air element into the earth element, she had been able to create a structure in mid-air.

Changing denser elements to air produced only slightly less astonishing occurrences. Sometimes Dipa Ma and her sister arrived for interviews with Munindra by spontaneously appearing in his room, and Dipa Ma occasionally left by walking through the closed door. If she was feeling especially playful, she might rise from her chair, go to the nearest wall, and walk right through it.

Dipa Ma's abilities in this regard were once tested and confirmed by a third party. Munindra knew a professor of ancient Indian history at Magadh University who was very skeptical about psychic powers. Munindra offered to prove the existence of such powers, and the two of them set up an experiment. The professor posted a trusted graduate student in a room where Dipa Ma was meditating to watch and make sure she didn't leave the room. On the appointed day, the student verified that Dipa Ma never left her meditation posture. And yet, at the very same time, she appeared at the professor's office ten miles away and had a conversation with him.

First I need to say, and which most of you know, these powers do not have anything particularly to do with enlightenment. One can be fully liberated without any of these powers, and one can have these powers without in any way being liberated. So it's important to be careful not to confuse them. But the reason I mention it—first because I just like the stories—but it shows how our concepts can be so limiting. I mean, this is so far outside of the Western conceptual worldview. And you're among the few people I would read this to because, you know, it's just...

Our concepts can limit us. And even if you don't believe this or believe it's possible, at least I hope you'll entertain the possibility that there are many things that are possible that we don't yet know. It comes from understanding that this body, which we take to be so solid and real and so self, so *me*, is really an energy field. And certain beings with these great powers of mind that come from samadhi—they can play with these elements.

So the sense of self comes when we get identified with or attached to the concept of body, when we're not looking at it more deeply. It also happens, as we well know, when we're lost in and identified with our thoughts and emotions, with all these internal stories and dramas that we're telling ourselves so often through the day. We're creating all of these mind worlds. None of it is happening. It's so amazing. We're sitting and then we just get lost in a thought, lost in a story, lost in an emotion as if it's real—not seeing that it's just a thought, it's just an emotion.

Munindra had a great line pointing this out. He said it very often, so it's stuck in my mind. He said, "The thought of your mother is not your mother—it's a thought." If we could remember that, our lives would be so much lighter. We're taking the thoughts, the concepts, we're taking them to have a reality that they don't have. We're building a whole picture, and meanwhile they are just a thought. That's all that's going on.

Not only that—not only is the thought of your mother not your mother—the thought itself, the emotion itself, does not belong to anyone. So even when we see the thought as a thought, we can get caught with identifying, "Well, *I'm* the one who's thinking." That "I" is extra.

There's a great Tibetan image in a teaching that talks about the clouds that wander through the sky—no roots, no home. I love the image because can you picture clouds going through the sky with roots? Each cloud rooted to the ground. It's kind of a ridiculous image. Well, they speak of how thoughts and emotions are like these clouds. Thoughts and emotions wander through the mind—no roots, no home. They're simply arising like cloud formations. They're arising out of conditions. They are not rooted in anything. They arise out of conditions in the open sky of the mind. They come into being. Conditions change. They disappear.

But what we do is we root them. "This thought is me. This thought belongs to me. This emotion is mine. I'm angry. I'm happy. I'm sad." So we need to see how we're doing this, because this is the creation of the concept of self. This is how we get caught. We're rooting that which is rootless.

It's like what we call self is a mosaic. Self, "Joseph," is an appearance of a lot of different elements coming together in a pattern, and the pattern is there. We recognize that pattern. All of that is fine. When we look more deeply, though, we see that the pattern is created by the interplay of all of these changing elements. It's not that the elements belong to anyone. What we are is the pattern of changing elements.

Now, the most subtle level of attachment and identification—and the one where we get the most caught in terms of creating a sense of self—is our identification with consciousness, with knowing.

Even as we get some idea—and by now you probably have to some extent—we begin to get a sense of this body as just changing elements, coming and going. Thoughts coming and going. Emotions coming and going. We get some sense of the selflessness of it all.

But then we become identified with the knowing. "Well, I'm the one who's knowing all that." We create a sense of the witness, the observer. "I'm the observer of all this." And so we create, in our minds, this concept of the observer set apart from and separate from experience.

But through a growing careful attentiveness, we just keep looking at this process, all the aspects of it—both what is known and the knowing. We just keep being with it, observing, being mindful, being aware. We begin to see through a growing wisdom that consciousness itself is dependent on conditions. Consciousness itself is arising out of conditions and passing away.

I want to mention one little experiment I did—a thought experiment. When I was on retreat last year at the Forest Refuge, in the very classical teachings, the Buddha talks of how each sense-door consciousness arises out of conditions. For example, seeing consciousness happens when there's a physical organ of an eye, there's light, there's an object in front of the light, and there's attention. Physical organ of eye, light, object, attention—seeing consciousness will arise. And the same is true of all of the senses: ear, nose, tongue, taste.

So I was at the Forest Refuge, in the dining room eating lunch, and I started playing with this notion of taste consciousness, remembering these teachings of how taste consciousness arises out of conditions. What are the conditions? Tongue, food, saliva, and attention. Given those, the taste consciousness is going to rise.

So I did this little thought experiment. First, I started experimenting, watching the sense organ, the tongue. It's a weird organ. When you really pay attention to it, there's this thing moving around in the mouth that seems to have a mind of its own. But when you really look carefully, you see it's just doing everything it's doing. There's intention behind it, but it's kind of strange.

Then I did this little thought experiment: would taste consciousness arise if there were no tongue? And it was obvious that it wouldn't—that that consciousness was dependent on having an intact sense organ. It was very straightforward, very clear. But just by doing that experiment right in the moment of the sense experience, it was really quite impactful. Oh, no tongue, no taste consciousness. It's as if one could almost see the disappearance of that moment of consciousness—see so clearly how it's dependent on conditions and how the consciousness itself is not self. It's not I. It's just a function happening when all of the conditions come together. We can do this with each of the senses. It's very interesting—one way of deconstructing the notion of self, of I.

Now sometimes people hear all this and get a little panicky. "Oh my God, what's going to happen? We deconstruct the self and I'm going to just disappear." Nothing changes. Everything is exactly as it always was, except that we're understanding it more clearly, more accurately. There's less attachment, less identification. All the processes keep on working just fine. But we're not imprisoned by this construct of self which we have created. It's very liberating.

The Buddha gave one very powerful teaching to his son Rahula, who at this time had become a monk.

It's a very direct teaching. The Buddha said every aspect of this mind and body should be seen with perfect wisdom: "This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself."

This can become a mantra for us—a mantra of instruction, a mantra of pointing out. Whatever arises, whether it's the object, the thought, the consciousness, any experience that arises from any side, from any angle, we can remind ourselves: this is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself. We free ourselves from that identification.

Through a growing recognition of selflessness, we develop a deepening sense of connection. And this is kind of the joy of it all. Because on the deepest level, we begin to realize there is no one there to be separate. We have created the sense of separation through our identification and investment in this concept. As we begin to settle in, as that Japanese nun wrote, which I mentioned last week, we open the fist of our mind and fall into the midst of everything. That's what we're doing when we let go of our identification with this concept.

I'll just close with one teaching from one of the great Tibetan masters, Kalu Rinpoche. It kind of sums up this whole talk. He said, "We live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality. We are that reality. When we understand this, we see we are nothing, and being nothing, we are everything."

That is all.

Let's sit for a couple of moments. Just in these few moments, sit and don't do anything—just sitting and being in the momentary experience as it unfolds. As Ajahn Buddhadasa, a great Thai monk, said: there's nothing to do, nothing to be, nothing to have. Experience is just arising, passing away. It's selfless phenomena rolling on.

CHAPTER 41

Transcendent Dependent Origination

Sally Armstrong · 58 min

> *In this illuminating talk, Sally Armstrong presents the teaching of transcendent dependent origination (lokuttara paṭicca samuppāda) from the Upanisa Sutta (SN 12.23), a powerful alternative to the familiar wheel of dependent origination. While traditional paṭicca samuppāda describes how ignorance perpetuates the cycle of suffering, this teaching offers a liberating trajectory that begins with our current condition of dukkha and unfolds through twelve progressive stages toward complete emancipation.*
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> *The sequence moves from suffering (dukkha) through faith (saddhā), joy (pāmojja), rapture (pīti), tranquility (passaddhi), happiness (sukha), concentration (samādhi), knowledge and vision of things as they are (yathābhūta-ñāṇadassana), disenchantment (nibbidā), dispassion (virāga), liberation (vimutti), to the final knowledge of destruction of the taints (āsavakkhaya-ñāṇa). Armstrong emphasizes that this is not a rigid formula but rather a description of conditioning processes and possibilities.*
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> *Particularly valuable is her clarification of nibbidā, often mistranslated as 'disgust' or 'revulsion.' Drawing on Pāli scholarship, she explains it literally means 'not finding' satisfaction in conditioned phenomena—a natural turning away rather than aversion. Armstrong encourages practitioners to notice moments of letting go in daily practice as small movements along this liberating path, while cultivating the wholesome qualities of joy, happiness, and faith that form its necessary foundation.*

I spoke to you last week about the seven factors of enlightenment, that description of the beautiful qualities of heart and mind that we develop on this path and that lead us towards liberation.

I'd like to speak tonight about another list that is in some ways similar to the seven factors, but has quite a different unfolding and is quite powerful in the breadth and scope that it offers to us. What's interesting about comparing these two lists is recognizing that they represent just one of many ways in which the Buddha described the unfolding of our path. This shows us there's not one way that this might happen. There's not one set formula of sequential experiences that then lead to liberation. The Buddha was a very skillful teacher, and he saw that each of us has our own unique set of characteristics and responds in different ways to experience, so he offered a variety of paths and processes that describe the sequence of awakening.

This teaching is called transcendent dependent arising, or transcendental dependent origination—you can see different translations of it. It's a very inspiring teaching, but it's actually not that common in the suttas; it only appears a couple of times. Because of its breadth and scope, I find it very inspiring and uplifting for the range of experiences it encompasses and the trajectory it shows us is possible.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, one of the preeminent Pali scholars of our day who is currently translating nearly all of the Pali canon into beautiful English, considers this a tremendously important sutta, even though it's somewhat rare. One of the reasons he considers it so, and I agree, is that it begins with our current condition. It begins with where we're caught, where we struggle, and shows us a way out of that struggle to the greatest depths of liberation. It doesn't begin assuming that we're already in a great place. It says, no, right here and now in the difficulties of our life, in the torments of mind, we can actually find a path that will lead us to greater and greater freedom.

This is also a teaching about the conditioned nature of our experience. It shows us, as we've been emphasizing throughout this retreat, how nothing arises independently. Things arise out of causes and conditions. If we can begin to understand that process, we're not then a victim of it. We can actually have input into those causes and conditions and change the trajectory if we bring mindfulness in, if we bring wisdom in. This teaching lets us know that through clarity of intention and wisdom, we can be an active participant in the unfolding of our spiritual path and practice.

The particular way this list unfolds that I'm going to speak about tonight is from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the Upanisā Sutta. As I said, it's a teaching of conditionality. It's important to remember when you hear or read teachings of conditionality, of cause and effect, that what is happening here is a conditioning process. Even though it's cause and effect, it doesn't mean it's a literal process in the sense that A always means B will happen next. What conditioning actually means is that when A is like this, B is like this or like that—the first factor influences the next factor. It doesn't cause it to happen.

It's really important to get this distinction because we can become both blaming and expectant if we think it should be happening in a particular way or shouldn't be happening in a particular way. So it's a conditioning process. In this list, for example, the first two links are suffering and faith. The teaching is that when suffering is like this, faith is like this. When we understand suffering in this way, faith can arise and have a certain effect on us. It's conditioning, not directly causal in the sense that if this happens, that happens.

This teaching of conditionality is a strong factor in another teaching that many of you may be aware of called dependent origination. Andrea is going to talk more about some aspects of this profound teaching tomorrow night, so I'll just refer to it in the sense that it relates to this teaching on transcendent dependent origination.

Dependent origination, briefly, is a description of twelve links that begin with ignorance, lead us through craving and becoming, all forms of attachment and self-identification, into more suffering. Then because we haven't seen through the cause of that suffering, we're immediately back in ignorance and the cycle just continues. It's really a description of us being caught on the wheel of suffering, caught in the cycle of saṃsāra —an endless trajectory when we don't recognize it, don't understand what's happening. This teaching of transcendent dependent arising actually emerges from the understanding of dependent origination.

So transcendent dependent arising is just another map, another way for us to understand our unfolding. I spoke last week about maps and how they can be both useful but also sometimes misleading. I love maps and love to understand where I am in a new environment. One of the things I've done since I've come here is learn more about where I am than some people who've lived here for twenty years, because I like to go out and find maps and explore. I actually got another map last week—I was in a little local store and they just had on the counter a little book that said something like "Twelve Easy Walks Around Barre." I thought, sounds great.

Picked up this book and we decided to go for a walk on our day off a few days ago. I chose from this book what I thought was a very simple walk, taking into account the capacities of my companions—not naming anyone. I thought, you know, it says "easy." If it says easy in this book, it must be easy, because one of the walks in the book is walking around the track at the local high school. So that's kind of the beginning of easy in this book.

But as you know, the hardest part of orienting yourself on any map description is finding the starting point. Have you ever had that problem? You get to the basic area, but you can't find the important point—where do you begin from? And of course, at first we were driving and we missed the beginning. We went way past it and had to backtrack to find where we were meant to start from.

So we found it—we were pretty sure we'd found it, but you're never 100% confident. We head down this trail, and we're meant to take a right-hand turn. It says, "after less than half a mile." So we're getting a sense of the distance, and a little way down the path, we see a left-hand turn. We go, no, that's not it. We want a right-hand turn. So we keep going.

It gets to at least about half a mile, and the whole track—we're on like a fire road—turns right. There's a little trail off to the left. We're all going, well, we're meant to turn right, but it says it's a turn, not that the whole trail goes. But maybe this is it. We hadn't seen anything else. So we keep going, we just turn, and we follow.

Then it says there should be a swamp on your left. We go, well, there's a little patch of water over there. Maybe this is the swamp. We're reading the description of the path, which is quite detailed. Then you go up a little rise. There's a pine tree. Yes, a little rise. So we're trying to convince ourselves that we're on this right path, matching the directions in the book—because it's one of those that just has the outline of the path and nothing to put it in any context. We're going further and further, and the similarity between the description and what's happening is getting further and further apart. But we're reluctant to admit that we've gone the wrong way.

I especially keep going. Maybe it's this little crossing here—is this the dike that we're meant to be crossing? Just see how we're trying to fit our experience into what it says in the book. And I even commented at the time, this is really like meditation, where you get some ideas in your head and you have an experience. Maybe this is it, isn't it? It feels like this and it looks like that. Am I having this experience? It was really like that.

But after a while, where it really got different and we were passing under transmission lines and coming to T-intersections, even I had to admit that I think we were lost. And I hate going back. We'd been sort of turning right, so I kept thinking, well, maybe we'll just go in a circle. If we keep walking, we'll come back. My companions very wisely said, no, we're not going in the right direction.

So we turned around and met some other hikers who said, oh, you needed to turn off way back there. And as soon as they said it, I realized where we'd gone wrong. When there was that left turn, we needed to look across the path, and there was the right-hand turn that we'd missed. But because we were looking left, we didn't see it and we kept going. And as we went back, I looked—we all looked to find it—and there it was, as clear as day.

This is what can happen if we have some idea in our head, or if the information we have is limited to just this linear process. So what I'm trying to emphasize in telling this story is not to take these teachings as some absolute: this is the way it should look, if you get to here, this is what happens next. They're really just suggestions about possibilities. What's most important to take from them is not to zoom in one direction thinking this is what should happen.

But to understand possibilities and factors of mind and heart that can be cultivated, and what's actually really supportive in your practice and needs to be enlivened to allow this development to happen. So it really is much more about possibilities rather than any sense of limitation or constriction.

My understanding of this also comes from the fact that, as I said, there are many of these kinds of lists in the suttas where the Buddha talks about how the path unfolds, and they're quite different. They'll have some similar moments, and then they'll diverge. So each of us will find a teaching or a practice or a way that works for us, or at different times find ourselves connecting with a certain map or unfolding and can use that—but not to be constricted by it, not to just think that this is the only way it can happen.

Because we don't want to get caught up in the idea of journey and goal. Then it can get kind of future or outward-oriented: "This is where I am here, stuck in suffering, and I have to get there, wherever that is." And it doesn't allow us to fully be right where we are.

It's often that the spiritual journey is depicted as kind of an outward movement—the classic description of the seeker putting on their backpack and heading out into the wilderness, the hermit going out to the hut somewhere. We think there has to be this movement, physical movement outwards. This archetype has actually been co-opted by cartoonists. If you've noticed, there's now a plethora of what we call the guru cartoons, and I've taken to collecting them because there's this whole archetype of cartoons. The classic is the guru on the mountaintop outside a cave, and he's got a long beard and a little loincloth or something on, and someone has just crept up the mountaintop and has obviously just asked the question. You have to assume it's something like, "What is the meaning of life?" One of the ones I saw recently has the guru responding to this person: "I'll make a deal with you. I'll tell you the secret of life if you tell me how to program my VCR." Actually, you can tell it's old—now it would be how to program my TiVo. That's even more complicated.

But it's not about having to get from here and go there. In teaching about these kinds of processes, it's really an inner unfoldment, a very natural development that only arises out of a deep and profound connection to being where we are right now. So I'm not wanting to put it out there as some sense of this is what you should be striving for or this is where you have to go, but really as a much broader view than that—a view of possibilities.

Because even as they're presented linearly, as I was saying last week, they don't work in that way optimally. There are many feedback loops. They're not so discrete often, the different steps. So you really have to use them as skillful means, not as something definitive.

But there is this sense of development. This is a path of development, where we really see the places of constriction, the places of delusion that keep us bound, and open to the possibility of greater clarity, greater freedom, greater happiness.

This process of deepening can only happen if we're willing to keep connecting again and again with our experience. So the forward movement isn't actually forward at all. It's staying present over and over again with what's happening to us here and now in this moment. What's really happening in that is continuity—a continuity of awareness. It's what, again, we've been talking about a lot over the days of the retreat. And you can really feel the power of that. For those of you that have been here for many weeks or even just a few weeks, feel the power of that continuity.

And to really see for yourself how, if any thoughts of ending of the retreat—as far away as that might be, in the real world out there it's weeks away, for most people would be the longest retreat they've ever been on—but if we have that sense of "Oh, end is nearly here, I'm nearly finished," practice will stall. Because we put an end to that willingness to connect. We're leaning out into the future. So to use these teachings and the opportunity we have of being here for these many more weeks, to really stay present and to see what's possible to cultivate in our hearts and minds in the greater, greater depths of freedom.

As I said, this teaching arises out of the wheel of dependent origination, these twelve links that begin with ignorance, describe sort of the human condition of having a mind and a body and all of the senses, the place we get caught in the vedana—the pleasant, unpleasantness, or neutrality of experience—into craving and then clinging. And we just go round and round.

When I was thinking about this—you know, it's often depicted as a wheel—and thinking of all the things that go around, it could be like a bicycle wheel turning. What I thought was that it is possible to break that wheel. That's how we discover freedom. And we can break it in a moment. It's kind of like sticking a stick or something in the spokes of a bicycle wheel as it's going around. If you do that, it just jams to a stop. But unfortunately what happens is we're there, we've stopped it, the wheel has ended, there's freedom in that moment. And then we go, "Oh, but there's that." And we let go of whatever it was that stopped the wheel.

It's not a perfect analogy, but I'll go with it. We move on to the next thing that's caught our attention or that we're worried about. And there's such momentum in the wheel that it just starts up again. Then maybe we find another place where we stop that wheel, we stick something in the spokes. But the momentum is so strong.

I also thought of a Catherine wheel—you know, those fireworks that are somehow arranged in a circle, and the fireworks come out at one end so it spins around and around. The reason that made sense to me is because I think of transcendent dependent arising as opposed to a wheel. It's like those fireworks that go up and then just dissolve—those beautiful clouds of color and light that are so real and so alive and brilliant, but then they just flicker out.

This is the potential of this teaching, of transcendent dependent origination. It's a one-way street, in a sense. If you begin on this path, this is where it heads—to the highest liberation, to the complete freedom and emptiness that's possible.

Unfortunately, it's not that quick for most of us. I think it's actually a bit more like another analogy I thought of. If you know that circus game—I've never played it, but it's often in cartoons I would see when I was growing up. In circuses or sideshows, they would call it Ring the Bell. It's the arcade game where there's a platform and a big bell, and you have a big mallet, and you have to hit the thing. How strong you are determines how far up it goes, up this rope or something. And if you hit it really strongly, you ring the bell, and that's like you've won the prize.

I kind of think of transcendent dependent arising like that. Here we are hitting our bell—and plop, plop. It just goes back again. Next time, maybe a little higher. Sometime we'll get it right. We'll hit that thing and boing, out it'll go. But for most of us, we don't make it the whole way today or whenever.

But not to think of it that way. I put out that analogy, but it's not that great. And it's not like, "Oh, we have to get there, this is what it's all about." Because every movement of exploration of this process is actually creating this amazing foundation for our practice and our lives. No movement in this direction is wasted, even if there might be a sense of perhaps not being in such a rarefied state as you were yesterday or three weeks ago—whenever your peak experience that you think it was might have been.

Again, the image is like climbing a mountaintop. You make all the effort to get there, and when you get to the top, there's this amazing view. But you can't live up there. So you go back down, but you've seen that view. You've seen that possibility. It rewires something in the brain. Something shifts. This is what these kinds of teachings show us.

I also think it's—I don't know why I had all these analogies for this—it's not like climbing a ladder where as you climb, you let go of the rung below. It's more like stairs that have bulk on them, like those Japanese staircases where you're actually creating something as you go.

It's a process. The main thing is not to think of it as being about the destination but about the journey. And what this teaching does is show us that there is a wisdom to the unfolding that we experience.

Sometimes all we want is to ring that bell. We're just going to keep banging on that thing until we ring it. And this teaching says, no, you can't just wail away at it. You've got to put in the groundwork that develops these beautiful states of heart and mind—joy, happiness, tranquility. From that foundation, the opening can happen. There's a lot of wisdom here. This foundation of well-being is necessary for us to open to these deeper and more challenging experiences and practices.

So that's my introduction. I haven't even started. There are twelve links to go.

The list begins with suffering. And that's why we can all relate, I think. Suffering. Then faith, joy, rapture, tranquility, happiness, concentration, knowledge and vision of things as they are, disenchantment, dispassion, emancipation, knowledge and destruction of the taints.

It's quite an amazing list that begins right here with where we're struggling and moves through these beautiful qualities of mind and heart, then has this turning towards liberation and away from being caught in the things of the world, culminating in final and complete emancipation.

Its connection to dependent origination is with this first link of suffering. Because it's a wheel, you can't really say an ending, but suffering is the twelfth link that then goes on to ignorance and starts again. Transcendent dependent origination—this is the fireworks thing. It goes off from suffering into the unknown, the wild blue yonder.

Suffering is the first noble truth. Guy talked for a whole evening about it, so it's something we've been bringing into our practice, bringing into our mindfulness—this opening to the truth of suffering. But it's a noble truth, the noble truth of suffering. And it's a really interesting question: What makes it noble? Why noble? What's noble about suffering?

Good friend and colleague Gil Fronsdal asked this question and said that it becomes noble when you find a path in it—when you actually understand the suffering and see that there's a way out, that there's a cause of suffering and therefore an end of suffer-

ing. As Ajahn Chah says, there's the kind of suffering that leads to more suffering and the kind of suffering that leads to the end of suffering. This is the kind of suffering that leads to the end of suffering, when we understand it and see there's a possibility of finding a way out.

The Buddha, of course, was the one who discovered this path. When he was on his journey, he had no teacher or guide. All he had was his suffering and a conviction that it was possible to end the suffering. He went from living a very luxurious life to seeing so clearly, with great vividness, the suffering and challenge of life. He hadn't known about old age, sickness, and death, and when he saw those as truths that were true for him as they were for everyone, he was so shocked he needed to find a way out. That propelled him on his journey.

But for this teaching to arise or this process to happen, something has to shift in our relationship to suffering. In dependent origination, we're just lost in the suffering, in the usual scheme of things. We're resisting it, kicking and screaming, coming up with strategies, trying to hold on to things, trying to push other things away. It's this endless struggle to try and get away from or out of suffering, and it just keeps us going on that cycle.

For the process of transcendent dependent arising to happen, something has to shift in our relationship to suffering. What has to happen is we have to apply the teachings of the First Noble Truth.

There is suffering. And the practice or the imperative that comes with that is suffering is to be understood. We need to understand this process of suffering and why it comes about and see for ourselves, even though we're not perhaps fully or completely experiencing it, see the possibility that there is an end to suffering, there is a way out of suffering. This is what has to happen for this shift to take place.

And all of us have made that shift. We wouldn't be here on retreat if we didn't have that belief that it's possible to end suffering, to diminish suffering, to find greater freedom. Otherwise, we'd just be lost in suffering. We'd be suffering in a different way out there in the world, choosing to suffer in this unique way here on retreat.

So we see that when we have this different relationship to suffering, what's actually being evoked in us is the next factor, the next stage, and that is faith. Suffering, when the wisdom factor comes in, when we're on the path, leads to faith. It's an interesting movement there, that the actual experience of suffering is what brings us onto the path because we see the possibility of the end of suffering.

Carol talked beautifully last night about faith, so I won't say too much more about it, but because it's so important to this list, because of this transition out of being lost in suffering and going around and around on that wheel, it's faith that breaks that trance, that opens this new set of possibilities. So it's really very central to this process.

I can remember in my early years of practice, I also started with Christopher Titmuss. Faith wasn't much talked about. It was really do it for yourself, see it for yourself, forget all of the trappings of Buddhism, and just sit and be mindful. Or walk and be mindful, or live and be mindful, but just do it for yourself.

Having practiced now for a long time, I've really seen that faith is central, that unless we have some sense of both faith in ourselves and our own capacity to awaken, but also faith in possibilities that we haven't yet opened to, faith in the example of others, faith in the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, it's very hard to really deepen and develop on the path. So faith can be quite central.

I can remember my first retreat in India in the early eighties. It was actually with S.N. Goenka, and I really didn't have a clue what I was doing. It was incredibly difficult, but I can remember so clearly the thought coming again and again: "Oh, it doesn't have to be this way. I don't have to keep perpetuating my suffering and through that causing suffering to others." And it was such a revelation.

I can also remember on that first retreat having a vision. I'm not someone who normally has visions. I'm a very down-to-earth kind of person, so this was a little unusual, and I still remember it. In the vision, I was sitting looking out and I saw Jesus in front of me. Jesus was kind of walking away from me but turning around towards me and beckoning. And when I looked beyond Jesus, what he was beckoning to was the Buddha sitting there. It was just a lovely invitation, an evocation of a path, and an inclusion and a welcoming. It was quite inspiring to me.

I went to Goenka and said, "What does this mean?" He said, "Don't think about it. It doesn't matter." But I actually found it quite enlivening. And why it came up for me, I would forget about it at times, but a number of years ago Guy and I went to teach a retreat in Perth, Australia, where I'm from—not from Perth, I'm from Australia—and it was in a rented facility, as these retreats often are. It was a Catholic retreat center, so there were lots of crucifixes and pictures of Jesus around, not many Buddhas.

But the retreat managers had set up this nice altar with the Buddha sitting behind us. When I first went to take my seat up on the teaching platform with the Buddha behind me, I looked out at all the people, and it wasn't as big a room as this, so not that far away on a far wall was a portrait of Jesus. It was one of those seventies portraits of

Jesus where he's very handsome, he could be a movie star, blonde hair and beard—he looked like a surfer almost. But it was a glass portrait of Jesus. So as I looked at him, right in front of me, what was reflected was the image of the Buddha.

That vision I had was replicated as I sat there, now in the teaching position. It was just an amazing moment for me when I think of all of the confusion and doubt and unfounded optimism that I had about my practice at that time twenty, thirty years ago, whenever it was, to now really sitting in a place of such faith in the teachings. It was a beautiful moment to realize the possibility of just being on the path and where it can lead.

So we often begin with what's called blind faith, where there's just a sense that other people have told us this is good, this is a good thing to do. Your first retreat is often out of blind faith. You have no experience yourself. It was that way for me. I was beginning to read about Buddhism.

I was in McLeod Ganj, where many Tibetans lived, and someone simply said to me, "If you want to learn about meditation, go and do this retreat." And so I took myself off. I didn't have a clue where I was going. I had to find the place, which was very difficult. I didn't know the teacher, didn't know anyone else going there, and yet I had this amazing experience. But it was really blind faith that got me there.

Then we develop what's called bright faith. Bright faith is where something has really been awakened in us. We've heard the teachings, we see that possibility—and that's what I had on my first retreat. "Oh, it doesn't have to be like this." Something has shifted, but it's not yet very established.

Then we move to what's called verified faith. That's where we know for ourselves. We've had experiences of letting go, of opening, of transformation, of greater happiness or freedom. We're on the path. It is what we do, what we know, what we love, and what we treasure. And this can lead on to even unshakable faith, where whatever challenges might come up, whatever might happen, the faith remains steady.

Carol told the story the other night about Suppabuddha, the leper. Part of that story is that as he's hearing the Buddha—if you remember, the Buddha recognizes that he's a person who can truly listen—someone tests him after he's heard the Dhamma and awakened. They say, "Suppabuddha, you're a miserable wretch, a leper. I'll give you all this money if you say the teachings are false." And Suppabuddha says, "How can you call me a miserable wretch? I have the Dhamma, and I wouldn't give it up for all the money in the world." That's unshakable faith. That's what can happen.

Sharon Salzberg has written a beautiful book about faith, very personal and moving, about her experience in the development of faith. She says, "I want to encourage delight in the word, to reclaim faith as fresh, vibrant, intelligent, and liberating. This is a faith that emphasizes a foundation of love and respect for ourselves."

This is what's possible, and we see it for ourselves, experiencing directly the benefits of this practice and this path. The Buddha said, "Faith is the beginning of all good things." In faith there is an uplift in the heart. As I mentioned, *saddhā* is the Pali word, and it literally means "to put one's heart upon." It's a very heartfelt quality.

This leads to the next factor of joy, or *pāmojja*. So we have suffering leading to faith, and faith and the uplift that comes from it leading to joy. Part of this progression is that as we're more and more connected to the path, we feel the benefits. Just out of faith and seeing the possibilities for ourselves, joy can naturally arise.

Pāmojja is sometimes translated as gladness or delight. It's said to come out of a diminishment of the hindrances—as those difficult states of mind diminish, what we experience, what becomes possible for us, is this beautiful quality of joy or delight. But it's not a joy that's directed outwards. It can include that, but it is definitely an inner experience of well-being and contentment, where we're free of worry and restlessness, all of the different ways the hindrances can manifest. We discover appreciation, gratitude, and contentment.

It's actually becoming quite a popular practice these days to deliberately cultivate joy. We did the *muditā* practice the other night, and I hope you felt some of the benefits of deliberately turning the mind and heart to this beautiful quality. With that inclination of the mind, we do cultivate that experience.

James Baraz, a good friend and teacher, has been offering these "Awakening Joy" classes for a couple of years now. He's had hundreds and hundreds of people attend them, either in person or online—monthly teachings about awakening this quality of joy in our lives. It's been amazing to see the effect it's had on his students and how the deliberate paying attention to what brings joy cultivates joy. We sort of know this, but we never follow through because we get distracted or something else seems more important.

I recently received a quote from one of the participants in James's class who said, "I have an increased awareness of joyfulness and the possibility of cultivating it."

I also understand better how to experience it rather than the old random way of simply being surprised or, even worse, unaware of its presence. I now practice choosing to see joy—the joy inherent in many situations—rather than the negative or painful aspects.

So we can actually cultivate this quality and see it as a really necessary and wholesome factor on the path.

In the sequence comes next a couple of factors that I've already spoken about, so I won't go into them too much. From suffering, which leads to faith, which leads to joy, comes rapture or *pīti* that I spoke about. It's one of the factors of enlightenment, that rapt attention in the meditation object that allows the mind to become absorbed and interested in what's happening.

And then, in the same part of the sequence as the seven factors, it leads to tranquility or *passaddhi*—calmness, that natural movement when the energy balances out of the rapture. When the mind is absorbed in the object, the experience can be calmness or tranquility, often a lack of thought, a settledness in the process.

Out of tranquility comes happiness or *sukha*. This is not a bubbly kind of happiness, not la-di-da skipping around, because you can see the preceding factor is tranquility. Tranquility infuses the happiness. Steve Armstrong has a beautiful description of *sukha*—he calls it happy contentment of mind and body. It really is a sense of well-being in this kind of happiness, a softness, a sweetness, very delightful.

And happiness, this kind of meditative happiness, leads us on to the next factor of concentration, *samādhi*. What's interesting is that the proximate cause—and that's what the preceding factor is in these kinds of lists—the proximate cause of *samādhi* or concentration is not effort or striving or hours on the cushion or breaking your knees just to sit a bit longer. It's *sukha* or happiness.

Really helpful to remember the next time you're gritting your teeth and saying, "No, no, no, I have to sit longer or harder or more," or whatever your definition of striving is. It's actually contentment, happiness that develops the kind of *samādhi* that's helpful in this progression.

And so what we're talking about in this context of our practice for *samādhi* is not necessarily deep states of absorption. There is that in *samādhi*, but all we need to develop is successive moments of mindfulness, continuous mindfulness. That's the kind of *samādhi* that leads to this connecting to our experience, to this sense of presence, undis-

tractedness. The mind is responsive and what we call malleable—there's not a lot of distractions. The hindrances have been let go of. There's a sense of joy and happiness in the practice. And so the mind is just fully present for what is.

What the mind can do then is open to insight. And this is always what *samādhi* is in service of—to lead us deeper into insight. The link here in this list from concentration goes to how they define insight as knowledge and vision of things as they are. Knowledge and vision of things as they are, the turn to insight. So we let go of the *samādhi* and that sense of protectedness and start to look directly at our experience, see what's happening. See the way things are.

And we've talked about what we see when we look in this way. Joseph spoke the other night about this clarity of seeing that sees beyond concepts to the true nature of things. We see the selfless nature, the impermanent nature of things. We see how things are conditioned. And it's not just a superficial seeing. As we say, you could go out and ask anyone, "Sure, things are changing." But we see it in a deep way. Knowledge and vision means not intellectual. We really see truly, deeply for ourselves. We see the inherent unreliability of experience, the unsatisfactoriness of experience.

And then comes another interesting turn. So we've taken this concentrated mind, we've opened it to look clearly at the nature of our experience, and seeing the impermanence, the selfless nature, the conditioned nature leads to the next factor, which is disenchantment, *nibbidā*. Joseph spoke about this either in a Q&A or in his talk the other night. Disenchantment—breaking the spell, the illusion that we usually live in and under.

Often this Pali word *nibbidā* was translated as revulsion or disgust. And one would get to this part of the list and think, "Hmm, joy, happiness, tranquility, and then what? Revulsion, disgust? I don't want that. I don't want to be revulsed by my experience or disgusted by it." And I was always a little concerned about that myself. It didn't seem like it was really meeting the experience and fully connecting with it and allowing me to open to it.

Andy Olendzki, who's a scholar at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies just down the road, wrote a great paper on this, a very short paper, but I found it so helpful. He looked really into the etymology of this term and could see more clearly what was meant by *nibbidā*. He said that the literal meaning is "without finding." And he tells this story from the suttas of how it's talked about:

There is a story in the text that usefully illustrates the meaning of this most important of terms. A dog stumbles across a bone that has been exposed to the elements for many months and is therefore bleached of any residual flesh or marrow.

The dog gnaws on it for some time before he finally determines that he is not finding any satisfaction in the bone, and thus he turns away from it in disgust. It is not that the bone is intrinsically disgusting. It is rather the case that the dog's raging desire for meat just will not be satisfied by this bone. He is enchanted by the prospect of gratification as he scrapes away furiously at the bone. But when he finally wakes up to the truth that the bone is empty of anything that will offer him satisfaction, he becomes disenchanted and spits it out in disgust.

So it's really important what's being said here. It's not the object that's disgusting. It's this natural movement of mind as we see the inherent impossibility of objects to give us lasting satisfaction. The kind of happiness that this teaching offers to us can't be found in the objects of the world or in transitory experiences. And there's this natural turning away. This is what nibbida is. It's something where we let go easily of whatever the entrancement was. It no longer has the appeal. It's not disgusting. We're not pushing it away out of aversion.

I was trying to think of good analogies for this, and I came up with a rather extreme example. Remember when you were—if you were like me—ten or twelve years old and you'd come home from school, what was a good source of happiness for you? For me, it was to watch about two hours of television. Old reruns of Gilligan's Island and cartoons and Get Smart. I'm talking to a certain age group here, I'm sure, but you can imagine—that was happiness. Now imagine if someone said, "You get to watch two hours of television." Would you find happiness in that, satisfaction in that? It would just be, "No, I don't want to do that anymore. I used to find happiness in it. Now I no longer do." That's nibbida.

Another small analogy. We don't often give you much news here, but I'll tell you something. Today is Black Friday. I don't know if you have any memory of what that means. Black Friday is the day after Thanksgiving that's considered to be the busiest shopping day of the year. The media and stores all join together to hype this by having outrageous sales—a television for fifty dollars, ten cents for something. People line up for hours to get these deals on stuff. So today, that's what was happening out there. Do you have any interest in joining Black Friday? What would you feel like if we dropped you in Hampshire Mall right now? That's nibbida. That's turning away from something

that, for some people, brings extreme happiness. It was on the web today—one guy said, "If they're selling it, we're buying it." That's the mind state. Bargains. It doesn't matter if you wanted it or not. It's cheap, so you buy it.

Out of nibbida, what nibbida brings is a sense of letting go, yes. But it arises from a sense that there's something so much better on offer here. So there's this turning that's very natural and wise. And it leads naturally to the next step: dispassion.

From nibbida, disenchantment—not finding—to dispassion, viraga. Raga is usually translated as passion or lust. So viraga is the ending of passion, lust, or desire. This is the stage of the path, of this process, where it actually becomes transcendent.

Remember all the previous links. They're very much in our relationship to the relative world, to our emotional life, to a sense of well-being, beginning with suffering and faith—these relative qualities.

And there's this moment here where we turn out of nibbida, out of disenchantment. There's just a natural letting go of that movement of the mind, of greed and aversion, of holding on, seeing again that that's not where happiness is found. Another classic way of talking about this is turning to the deathless—inclining the mind, knowing that there (and it's not like there's a *there* there, but to make a relative thing)... that's not going to do it for me. Really seen for myself out of this place of happiness and contentment, knowing that these beautiful qualities are only cultivated through clear seeing, not through getting or having any particular experience.

And so we turn in this direction of letting go more and more. This dispassion is what leads to the next quality, the next factor: liberation, vimutti.

Out of that deep letting go, the mind opens and awakens. As the Buddha said, the practitioner understands as it really is: This is suffering. This is the origin of suffering. This is the cessation of suffering. This is the path to the cessation of suffering. These are the taints—the taints are basically the defilements. This is the origin of the taints. This is the cessation of the taints. This is the path to the cessation of the taints. The practitioner, knowing and seeing thus, the mind is liberated from the taint of sensuality, from the taint of existence, and from the taint of ignorance. When it is liberated, the knowledge arises: It is liberated.

But it doesn't stop with liberation. This is just the eleventh of the steps. Then there's the actual reviewing knowledge, which often happens in the teachings: knowledge of the destruction of the taints, āsavakkhaya ñāṇa. It's a reviewing. And what is the power of that reviewing? It's unshakable then. There's no doubt. The ending of greed, aver-

sion, and delusion—uprooted, not to arise again. This is complete liberation that's being talked about here: the mind of an arahant. It shows what's possible for us as we continue on this path.

But not to hold this lofty goal—this lifetime, perhaps many lifetimes maybe—out there in the future. Where I find this teaching helpful, even if I'm only touching it to small degrees, is the importance of this cultivation of the wholesome qualities, but the willingness to recognize when there is that turning away and letting go. When there is a letting go of whatever you were caught in—aversion, wanting, doubt, or fear—to notice that. The ending of that, the ending of whatever difficulty—this is an important moment. This is where we're moving along that path. And sure, because the grounds are still there, the conditions are still there, they may arise again. But this noticing of the endings, of whatever constriction, is what will actually keep us moving along this amazing process of deeper and deeper liberation, deeper and deeper possibilities.

The Buddha was a human just like us. So many people just like us have walked this path and experienced this kind of liberation. It's possible for all of us.

But don't make it seem too complicated. You don't have to memorize this. You don't have to work out where you are on the path or become despondent because you don't think you're very far. Use it as inspiration in the practice. I taught this at the DPP, the Dedicated Practitioners Program that I'm involved in at Spirit Rock, and one of the students there so loved it. I was just really inspired by her inspiration. Every time I would speak to her, she would talk about how it uplifted her heart to open to this teaching and know it was possible.

We spend so much time with our difficulties. It's really important to remember how valuable the cultivation of these beautiful states of mind is—like joy and happiness and contentment and tranquility—that they're necessary on this path. And faith. Faith in your capacity to awaken.

The capacity is there in all of us. It's onward leading. We just need to take one step at a time, one breath at a time, one experience, one moment at a time.

As Ajahn Chah said—and this is such a great quote—if you let go a little, you get a little peace. You let go a lot, a lot of peace. Let go completely, complete peace.

Let's just sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 42

Exploring Vedanā - Feeling Tone

Andrea Fella · 51 min

In this comprehensive talk, Andrea Fella examines vedanā—the feeling tone of experience—as one of the most pivotal aspects of Buddhist practice. She explains how every sense impression, whether physical or mental, carries a quality of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant (neutral). Drawing from the Buddha's discovery of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination), Andrea illuminates how feeling tone serves as a crucial junction point where mindfulness can interrupt the habitual chain leading from contact through craving to suffering.

The talk explores the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), where vedanā constitutes the second foundation of mindfulness, highlighting its importance in the Buddha's teaching. Andrea offers practical guidance for recognizing feeling tone in daily experience—from eating and walking meditation to noticing emotions and the wandering mind. She shares personal examples of discovering how anger can have an initially pleasant quality, how neutral feelings can slip into boredom, and how unnoticed pleasant sensations can launch the mind into fantasy.

Particularly valuable is Andrea's exploration of how causes and conditions shape our perception of pleasantness, and how the link between feeling and craving represents what the Buddha recognized as a 'weak link' in the cycle of saṃsāra. She reads from several suttas demonstrating that attending to the impermanent nature of feelings leads through disenchantment and dispassion toward liberation. The talk concludes with the insight that pleasant feeling becomes painful when it changes, painful feeling becomes pleasant when it changes, and neutral feeling is pleasant when known and painful when not known—pointing to the transformative power of mindful awareness.

Tonight, I'd like to explore a quality that we've spoken about quite a lot in the last weeks: the feeling tone of experience. In Pali, this is called the vedanā of experience—whether our experience has this quality of being either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant, often called neutral feeling tone.

The other night, Guy spoke about the second noble truth, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth that craving is the cause of suffering. But in his discovery of this second noble truth, the Buddha discovered something that went beyond this simple statement that craving causes suffering. He actually discovered an entire chain of caus-

al conditions that lead us through our typical reactivity in our lives. Sally spoke about this some last night—the chain of dependent origination, or sometimes called dependent co-arising.

I won't cover this in complete detail tonight, but I really want to go through the links of this chain that are relevant to tonight's talk on the feeling tone of experience.

Basically, because we have a mind and a body, we have these six sense doors: the five usual physical senses and the sense base of the mind. Through these sense doors, we experience contact with objects. We experience sight, sound, smells, taste, and touch with our physical senses. And we experience emotions, moods, mind states, and thoughts with the sense door of our mind.

Each of these sense impressions has a flavor to it. This is the feeling tone of experience. Each of our sense impressions is either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. So this feeling tone is very simple, very basic in our experience.

Based on that feeling tone, when something is pleasant, we typically like it and we want it. We want to get more of it. When something is unpleasant, we don't like it; we want to get rid of it. If something's neutral, we probably don't even notice it.

Eating ice cream is pleasant. We tend to like to eat it. We eat more and more of it, and then at some point we get full. If we start to overeat ice cream, our experience becomes unpleasant, and we tend to stop to avoid the unpleasant. It's kind of like we're this simple automatic machine, this very simple automaton that tries to increase pleasant experience and decrease unpleasant experience.

Based on the feeling tone, this wanting arises—either wanting to have or wanting to get rid of. And we usually, often automatically, react to that wanting by reaching out to either grab onto what we want to have or to push away the thing that we don't want to have. This is called clinging. Whether it's the movement to hold something to us or to push it away from us, it's called clinging.

Once an object is clung to, typically some kind of identity forms around it. It becomes mine, or it becomes me. This might take an obvious form such as "this is my sitting spot," or it might take a more subtle form such as "I'm the kind of person who likes to hike in the woods." It can take a range of manifestations, this quality of becoming.

In terms of this chain of causal conditions, we like becoming. There's something about that crystallization around something that feels good, that feels right. There's something we like about a sense of knowing who we are or what kinds of things define us. We like this brief moment of satisfaction, this becoming. Sometimes it takes the form that we feel like we're in control or that we know something.

From this point of becoming, according to the Buddha, even though we've just experienced this moment of satisfaction, suffering is inevitable. This might result from the obvious form of separation from something we consider mine—like if you have a beautiful vase that you're very fond of, and it breaks. There can be a feeling of sadness or loss, or perhaps anger if somebody else has dropped the vase. We might experience a feeling of loss if a relationship ends or at the death of a loved one.

But the suffering can also result from the fact that that moment of satisfaction we get when we have something, when we crystallize around it, doesn't last very long. That moment fades. And then there's this sense of wanting more, that "wanting to want" that Joseph talks about. We actually think that happiness in our lives consists of stringing together these little moments of happiness, these little moments of satisfaction. But this is a form of delusion. It's a form of ignorance.

So in our untrained minds, this kind of suffering that results when a moment of satisfaction ends, or when we experience separation from something we love, usually leads us towards ignorance. This ignorance then conditions our habitual patterns of greed, aversion, and delusion, and these patterns condition how our mind perceives other experiences. The cycle goes around and around.

Basically, mind and body condition our sense bases, which condition contact, which conditions feeling, which conditions craving, which conditions clinging, which conditions becoming, which conditions suffering, which conditions ignorance, which conditions these habitual patterns of mind. And so this goes round and round in our experience.

Sally talked last night about this chain of dependent origination, and she mentioned that it is not deterministic. It's possible to move out of this habitual cycle of samsara, this wheel that keeps samsara going. It's possible to exit this chain. She talked about one way of breaking the chain between suffering and ignorance—that with wise attention to suffering, with the understanding of suffering, we can move away from ignorance towards faith and on towards the transcendent dependent origination that she spoke about.

But there's another link in this chain that the Buddha recognized as a weak link, and that's the link between feeling and craving. This is the movement of the mind from pleasant to wanting, from unpleasant to wanting to get rid of, from neutral sensation to not noticing—or maybe we could say, not wanting to notice.

If we bring mindfulness and wise attention to the feeling tone of experience, just to whether it's pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, we can actually short-circuit this movement of the mind towards wanting. It's possible to experience something as pleasant without wanting it. It's possible to experience something as unpleasant without wanting to get rid of it. If we can simply notice this pleasant or unpleasant without the movement towards wanting, the suffering will not arise. This is the movement away from suffering.

But the only way this can happen, the only way we can see this cycle break, is if we can actually see the feeling tone of experience—to bring mindfulness to whether our experience is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

The Buddha described mindfulness of feeling most prominently in the Satipatthana Sutta, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. The feeling tone of experience, this vedana, is the second foundation of mindfulness. It's given an entire foundation all to itself. I think that highlights the importance the Buddha placed on this quality of mind. This very fine, very simple quality of mind is an entire foundation of mindfulness.

I'll read you the instructions, or a part of the instructions, that the Buddha gave. He's speaking to his monks here, to bhikkhus, but in other places in the commentaries it says that the term bhikkhu refers to anybody who is practicing the Dhamma. So this is speaking to all of us:

"And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating feelings as feelings? When feeling a pleasant feeling, a bhikkhu understands, 'I feel a pleasant feeling.' When feeling a painful feeling, he understands, 'I feel a painful feeling.' When feeling a neither painful nor pleasant feeling, he understands, 'I feel a neither painful nor pleasant feeling.'"

It's that simple. But it's not easy.

The part that's not easy is that we really need to recognize that we're feeling pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience. Usually when we experience something pleasant or unpleasant, we're quickly either moving towards it or away from it. We've hardly noticed there's an experience of pleasant or unpleasant before we're moving to get it or to get rid of it. We quickly spin into thoughts of planning—how to get it, how to

have more of it, how to get rid of it, how to never have it again in our lives. Stopping this momentum from the pleasant to the movement towards wanting, and all of the thoughts around it, is very difficult. It's hard to actually see the pleasant itself.

But this is helped by simply knowing that this is a really good quality to pay attention to. Until I heard these teachings, nobody ever told me it's a really good idea to notice when something's pleasant or unpleasant in your experience. Nobody said that to me. But it's a crucial place to highlight.

This feeling tone can be quite subtle. As I said, it's not something we've been trained to notice. Typically, we've been trained to react to it. That's how we've lived our lives—by reacting to pleasant, trying to get it, pushing away the unpleasant. But when we start to actually pay attention, when it's been highlighted for us that this is a quality useful to attend to, it can become quite obvious.

For instance, if you fall down and bump your knee, it's unpleasant. And if you're attuned to checking out pleasant and unpleasant, it will probably be pretty obvious that that's an unpleasant experience. When we eat a food that we like, there's often quite a bit of pleasant experience. Again, that's quite easy to see once we've gotten attuned to actually noticing the pleasant aspect. What's hard is to stop there, at that moment of pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. We're trained typically to respond to it.

But if we start seeing the feeling tone and seeing our response to it, we're beginning to see deeply into how the mind functions.

Every experience, as I mentioned in talking through the chain of dependent origination, whether physical or mental, has this quality of feeling tone. This is usually most obvious or easiest to see in our physical experience. It's pretty easy to know when we're experiencing unpleasant bodily sensations—unpleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, physical contact.

But mental experience also has a feeling tone. Anger, for instance, typically has an unpleasant quality to it. Joy has a pleasant quality. Thoughts themselves also carry a subtle feeling tone, though more often when we think we understand the feeling tone of a thought, it's actually because there's been a subtle reaction in the mind to that thought.

For instance, right now, just imagine that you're lying on a warm, sunny beach. Is there some kind of pleasant experience arising? Most likely it's the reaction—the emotions, the moods that were called up by that thought—that created the pleasantness. Now imagine somebody running their fingernails on a blackboard. If you're like me,

that's an unpleasant thought. But when I feel through it, when I investigate it in my experience, what's happening is that there's a visceral feeling through the body that's unpleasant—a reaction to that thought.

Actually, this type of reaction underlies the belief that certain physical sensations are inherently unpleasant as well. For example, I often wake up in the middle of the night and have trouble going back to sleep, so I'll get up to meditate. One night I woke and went to meditate, and partway through the meditation I heard this tapping noise. My experience of the tapping was that it was unpleasant. But I just kept paying attention, noticing, being mindful. And I began to notice that when I heard the tapping noise, there was a contraction in the body. That contraction was definitely unpleasant. When I paid further attention to it, as I heard the tapping, I felt a very subtle fear arise. The fear was clearly unpleasant.

As I continued attending to the fear, when I heard the tapping sound again, I realized that the tapping sound itself was actually neutral—even slightly pleasant. It was the reaction to the sound, the subtle fear, that made me think the sound itself was unpleasant. This can be a very interesting exploration of our experience.

The fact that all experience, mental and physical, has a feeling tone also explains why it's so hard to break out of this cycle, why it's so difficult to break out of this chain of dependent origination that we cycle around. In the cycle, feeling leads to craving, which leads to clinging, which leads to becoming, which leads to suffering or dissatisfaction.

But if we attend to the feeling tone of the links themselves, we notice that wanting is an unpleasant experience. Wanting feels like a deep sense of being unsatisfied. Our typical movement is to want to satisfy that desire, to get rid of this unpleasant feeling. We want to satisfy the desire—that is the way we've been trained. We satisfy the desire, the unpleasantness of wanting goes away, and in that satisfaction we also have that brief moment of becoming, that crystallization, that pleasant experience.

So we learn through repeated experience that when we get what we want, we receive this double hit: getting rid of something unpleasant while also getting that feeling of becoming, which is pleasant. The cycle tends to reinforce itself.

There's one sutta I particularly like that points to this fact—that feeling tone is a weak link in the cycle of dependent origination. It's a relatively short passage, describing a kind of chain of events. Though it's not a causal chain, it describes a way our experience can move as we pay attention:

"All things are rooted in desire. They come to actual existence through attention, originate from contact, and converge on feelings. The foremost of all things is concentration. All things are mastered by mindfulness. Their peak is wisdom. Their essence, liberation. All things merge in the deathless, and nibbāna is their culmination."

There are a couple of things I appreciate about this sutta. One is how it highlights that all things converge on feeling. The wording emphasizes the importance of understanding this feeling tone. In our experience, we encounter a wide variety of sense impressions—color, sight, sound, smells, tastes, and an endless stream of thoughts, moods, and emotions in our mind. We think we respond to the sense impression itself. We think, "I like blue," or "I don't like the way hot roofing tar smells," or "I don't like it when my partner says that to me." But all sense impressions converge on feelings.

For some of us, blue is pleasant. Hot roofing tar is unpleasant. The example of not liking what our partner says to us is a little more complex, but it might unfold something like this: when our partner speaks to us, there's the sound of the voice, and depending on the tone, that might be pleasant or unpleasant. But if what our partner is saying brings up an idea or a belief in our mind, there may be a reaction to that idea or belief which might be unpleasant—and that unpleasantness of that belief or idea is why we don't like what our partner says to us.

So from the wide variety of sense impressions, our reactions to those sense impressions actually just come down to this very simple quality of whether the sense impression is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. It's like a springboard, a narrow gateway through which we react to all of our experience. All things converge on feelings.

The other thing I like about this sutta is that it talks about *all* things. All things converge on feelings. The foremost of all things is concentration. They are mastered by mindfulness. All things converge on feeling, and through concentration and mindfulness on the feelings—on whether they're pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, on how they are coming and going—feelings are impermanent. With mindfulness, we can break this movement towards wanting. The concentration and mindfulness on feeling leads to wisdom. All things have liberation as their essence, merge in the deathless, and culminate in Nibbāna. All things. It doesn't matter what we're paying attention to. It might be the pleasantness of our hands on a mug of hot tea. It might be the unpleasantness of the cold as we walk outside. It doesn't matter. All things culminate in Nibbāna.

There's another sutta that describes a more causal link from this attention to feelings, which I'll read to you as well. This one highlights attending to the impermanent nature of feelings as being the key to our liberation:

Pleasant feeling is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, subject to destruction, vanishing, fading away, and ceasing. Painful feeling too is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, subject to destruction, vanishing, fading away, and ceasing. Neither painful nor pleasant feeling too is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, subject to destruction, vanishing, fading away, and ceasing. Seeing thus, a well-taught noble disciple becomes disenchanted with pleasant feeling, disenchanted with painful feeling, disenchanted with neither painful nor pleasant feeling. Being disenchanted, one becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, the mind is liberated. When it is liberated, there comes the knowledge: it is liberated. One understands: birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.

This is the typical statement of liberation of mind—the attention to feeling leading through some of these same links that Sally talked about last night: disenchantment, dispassion.

So the key with mindfulness of feeling is really to become familiar with what this feeling tone is. I'd like to talk for a while about how to engage with an exploration of feeling tone.

Probably the easiest place to attune to this quality is in our physical experience. Our touch sensations, particularly the contact of our skin, seem to be highly attuned to the painful, pleasant, and neutral aspects of experience. So simply exploring in your physical experience whether it is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—you can do this any time of day. It's actually a really wonderful exploration through the non-formal part of our meditation, doing the yogi jobs, brushing our teeth, getting ready for bed. What parts of the experience are pleasant? What parts are unpleasant? You'll notice a flow of changing experience. Washing the dishes—the warmth of the water, the weight of the dishes. Are they pleasant or unpleasant?

One commentary to the suttas, the Visuddhimagga, states that while this touch sensation, the physical experience of touch, can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, the other four physical sense doors are actually all neutral at the moment of contact. Any sense we have that the experience at those other four sense doors—sight, sound, smell, and taste—is pleasant or unpleasant has to do with a kind of reactivity in the mind, a very subtle movement of reactivity.

I'm not sure if I completely believe this, especially where taste is concerned. I kind of think there may be some tastes that are revolting because they're not good for us to swallow. But I do find it to be a really interesting exploration.

To look and see, when I am seeing something and perceive it as pleasant—is there some kind of reactivity in my mind? A thought, a construct, causes and conditions that have come together to create that pleasantness?

I had an exploration of this on one retreat. It was tea time here at IMS, and it was a very simple tea—I had bean dip and an apple. I took a bite of the bean dip, which was kind of tart and creamy. Then I took a bite of the apple. And it was the most pleasant apple I'd ever eaten. It was really, really delightful. These bubbles of delight came up through my body while I ate this apple. I thought, "Wow, that's cool," and I took another bite. It was pretty good too, but not quite so delightful as the last one.

I began exploring—maybe it was the bean dip. Maybe it was the bean dip before the apple. So I took a bite of the bean dip and then a bite of the apple, and yes, that was pretty pleasant. But over the course of the meal, I began to realize that the apple was losing a little bit of its allure. Even alternating it with the bean dip, it wasn't as delightful as it had initially been.

I could see that the causes and conditions coming together to create the quality of delightfulness, the level of pleasantness, were shifting. It's not just a simple valence, an on-off kind of thing where experience is either pleasant or not pleasant. There are gradations of these pleasant and unpleasant experiences. Feeling often comes about as a result of these causes and conditions.

An excellent place to play with mindfulness of feeling is with eating, because it engages all of our senses. We see our food—it may be beautiful on our plate, with different colors. We smell it before we eat it. We taste it, noticing the flavor, the texture on the tongue. We hear the sounds as we're chewing and swallowing. And we have all of the thoughts that arise around the food. So eating is a great place to play with mindfulness of feeling, especially if what you're eating is something you enjoy.

Another good place to pay attention to feeling tone is when strong emotions are present. See if you can recognize whether the emotion is pleasant or unpleasant. What feeling tone does anger have? What feeling tone does lust have? Happiness? Sadness? It can actually be quite surprising when we pay attention.

I had one experience on retreat where I was paying attention to anger quite a lot. Something had come up that made me angry, and this thing kept returning in my mind over and over again. So I kept experiencing the arising of anger. Generally, the experience of anger was unpleasant. But at one point, I saw the very beginning—just the very beginning of that feeling in the body. It was a feeling of warmth and fullness. And it was pleasant. It really quickly became heat and pressure, but that initial hit was pleasant. I

was kind of shocked. I thought, "I wonder if this is part of the hook of anger, this initial pleasant feeling." So explore in your experience. There can be surprises—not necessarily what you'd expect with pleasant and unpleasant experiences.

On my first three-month retreat, Carol was here as a teacher, and she gave the instruction: if you're feeling aversion in your experience, there's something unpleasant in your experience, probably unnoticed. On that particular retreat, while doing walking meditation, I was experiencing a lot of aversion to the other people walking nearby. I don't know if you've had this experience, but it was very common for me during walking meditation to have strong aversion to people walking near me.

Not too long after hearing that dharma talk, I was doing walking here in the upper walking room and somebody came up and started doing walking meditation right next to me. Immediately this feeling of aversion arose. I remembered Carol saying, "Okay, aversion—there's something unpleasant in your experience." So I started exploring: what in my experience is unpleasant? I checked my sight. The person did not particularly look unpleasant. Nothing unusual about how they looked.

They didn't smell bad. And they weren't bumping up against me, so there weren't any physical unpleasant sensations. I thought, well, there must be something in the mind then. Something's going on in the mind. I didn't particularly notice any thoughts that were unpleasant. The mind felt pretty quiet. But I just attuned toward noticing what might be happening in the mind while doing the walking back and forth.

And this thought erupted: "He's weird." I thought, well, that's a thought. But I didn't really get the connection between unpleasantness and that thought. It didn't quite sink in. So I kept doing the walking. At some point, another thought erupted: "He's got bare feet on, and it's freezing cold outside." This was my justification for the fact that he was weird.

And I could see that a whole complex had been created in my mind—a complex that I found unpleasant and was reacting to. When I saw that, on the next walking path, the whole thing fell apart, and I was spontaneously doing mettā for the person. It was quite remarkable to explore this, exploring feeling tone in your experiences.

It's also really interesting to explore how we react to neutral—the neither pleasant nor unpleasant experience. This can be more difficult because neutral feeling can be pretty subtle, and often we just skip right over it. We don't even notice it. But as the mind settles down, we start experiencing more of that neutral quality. And in that space of neutral, it's a really interesting place to see how identification gets created.

On one retreat, I was experiencing quite a bit of time in this neutral place, so I got to explore it a lot. Most of the time I could be right there in the neutral, but I would begin to see it slipping off into boredom or indifference. And the feeling tone of those was slightly unpleasant. So it was a nice exploration—watching the neutral to see when it just tipped, just slightly tipped off. Because in that neutral place, often not much is engaging us, and we'll either get bored or space out and move into that indifferent place.

Also on this same retreat, I was experiencing the neutral feeling tone and noticing sometimes a subtle leaning into that neutral experience—a waiting for something to happen. Because I had the idea that this neutral place was a good place in practice, and that something was supposed to happen from it. So there was this leaning into the neutral, this waiting, this expecting something to happen. And when nothing happened, the mind got judgmental: "You're a failure."

This has been one of my strongest habits. I talked about it in my last talk—this self-judgment and movement from "you're a failure" to self-hatred, to this feeling of unworthiness. And here it was being created out of nothing, out of neutral experience and an idea that something was supposed to be happening. So this place of neutral can be a really interesting territory to explore how our identity gets constructed out of this very balanced place.

Another really interesting place to explore feeling tone is around the wandering mind—when the mind goes off and when it comes back. Often I find that there are a number of ways the feeling tone operates here. We can leap off an unnoticed pleasant feeling tone into, "Oh, this is so nice, I'm going to come back next year to this retreat, and I'm going to have a nicer shawl next time." We construct a whole fantasy because we didn't notice that subtle feeling of pleasant.

So the wandering mind can go off from this feeling tone. Or from a neutral feeling tone—it can just space out when things get neutral, just drift off because there's not much holding our attention. Or from an unpleasant experience. Sometimes with unpleasant experience, we launch into fantasy to experience something pleasant. We construct a pleasant thing in our minds to avert, to get rid of the unpleasant experience in our bodies.

Noticing how the mind moves from feeling tone to wandering off can be a really good place to explore vedanā. And likewise, coming back—waking up from being lost in thought. Is the feeling tone pleasant? Is it unpleasant? I often find that the drifting of the mind, if it's just drifting, not an actual fantasy or judgment but just drifting—I don't

know if you're familiar with that, where it's not thinking about much in particular, just drifting—that can be a kind of pleasant experience that perpetuates itself because the pleasantness goes unnoticed.

So when you come back from the wandering mind, check into the feeling tone. I found when I started doing that, it actually helped the mind keep from wandering, because I realized I was missing the experience—particularly in that drifting, that pleasantness of drifting.

I wasn't noticing the pleasant. It wasn't apparent. It was just kind of lost in a fog of the drift.

As you become more familiar with feeling tone, you'll start seeing it more naturally rather than having to actually look for it, as I've been suggesting in this discussion. But it's helpful initially to actually attune yourself to this feeling tone because it can be difficult to see. It's so subtle, and we so quickly move off of it into reactivity. But as we start to get attuned to it and familiar with it, it will become more obvious, and then we can practice as the Satipatthana Sutta says: when something is pleasant, we know that it's pleasant; when something's unpleasant, we know that it's unpleasant; when it's neutral, we know that it's neutral.

When you can notice this feeling tone, you have the opportunity to actually witness the birth of reactivity—to see your mind moving from pleasantness to wanting, from unpleasantness to wanting to get rid of. And that begins to really show us how suffering is constructed. We start to understand the nature of suffering as that movement of reactivity from pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. And in that understanding of suffering are the seeds of freedom.

The last thing I'll say about feeling is that it can have this yin-yang quality to it. That is, in the pleasant are the seeds of the unpleasant, and in the unpleasant are the seeds of the pleasant. When pleasant experience ends, it's unpleasant. When unpleasant experience ends, it's pleasant.

The way neutral fits into this is quite interesting. I want to read to you the sutta that describes this. I like this sutta because it's a woman speaking—a nun—and the man talking to her is her ex-husband. He's asked her a number of very detailed questions, and he comes to questions about feeling:

"Lady, what is pleasant and what is painful in regard to pleasant feeling? What is painful and what is pleasant in regard to painful feeling? What is pleasant and what is painful in regard to neither painful nor pleasant feeling?"

"Friend, pleasant feeling is pleasant when it persists and painful when it changes. Painful feeling is painful when it persists and pleasant when it changes. Neither painful nor pleasant feeling is pleasant when there is knowledge of it and painful when there is no knowledge of it."

Let's sit for a few moments.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 43

Sakkāya-diṭṭhi: Who Do I Take Myself To Be?

Sharda Rogell · 58 min

In this profound dharma talk, Sharda Rogell examines sakkāya-diṭṭhi—the deeply rooted view of a permanent, separate self—as one of the primary fetters binding us to suffering. Using the evocative metaphor of a hidden moon and the parable of painting tigers on cave walls, she illustrates how we construct elaborate stories about who we are and mistake these mental fabrications for reality.

Rogell explores the three obsessive views that spring from papañca (mental proliferation): 'me' (sakkāya-diṭṭhi), 'mine' (taṇhā or clinging), and 'I am' (māna or conceit). She explains how these views interact with the five khandhas—body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness—creating the crystallized beliefs we mistake for a solid self. Drawing from the Buddha's teaching that 'whatever way one conceives, the fact is other than that,' she invites practitioners to question their habitual self-identifications.

The talk offers practical guidance for working with identity view through mindfulness practice. Rogell shares personal stories and retreat experiences demonstrating how awareness can reveal the constructed nature of self-concepts. She emphasizes that we need not eliminate personality or thoughts, but rather see them clearly for what they are—conditioned phenomena that are 'not mine, not I, not myself.' As identification loosens, she describes how qualities of the heart naturally shine through, revealing the 'perfume of selflessness' that emerges when the demanding 'I' softens.

In March of this year, I was teaching a retreat at one of my favorite places, which I've mentioned before in one of my talks, at the retreat center in New Zealand called Temawata. I've been going there each year, and it's one of the places I really love. If you've been there, you know it's very clean and the skies are very clear.

One night on the retreat, about four or five days into a ten-day retreat, we were realizing that we hadn't seen the moon in a while. And it wasn't because there were clouds in the sky. It was a very clear night. The nights during this retreat were very, very clear. In this part of New Zealand, when the skies are clear, you can see stars like you've never seen. You can see the Milky Way and the black holes in the Milky Way, and it's really spectacular.

So we kept wondering why the moon hadn't come up. Another night went on, and still no moon in this clear, clear sky. It went on a few more nights, and the staff I was with and the teacher I was with started getting very curious about this. Why isn't there a moon? We would go out and look over the horizon. We were down in a little bit of a valley with hills up above, and some of the yogis started coming out and saw us looking for the moon. It became this thing—where is the moon now? Five days, six days. It just doesn't happen like that.

Then we started making up stories about the moon. Maybe the moon blew up. Maybe somebody hijacked the moon. Maybe we'll never see the moon again. All these stories. We started to have fun with it, playing with it. But we didn't know. We didn't know what was going on.

Then, like the sixth night, we saw a tiny, tiny little white point of the moon coming right over the hill. A lot of yogis were involved at that point. "There's the moon! There's the moon!" It was all very exciting, and then the moon started coming up just over the horizon.

I'm mentioning this because when we don't know what's going on, in our confusion sometimes, we start making up stories about what's really true. In this case we were having a good time with it, but it started to reflect how this is what we do. We start making up stories, and depending on the clarity of mind and the stability of mind, we could have started believing some of these stories—like maybe we would never see the moon again, or maybe it did blow up, or somebody stole the moon.

In a way, the moon is a good metaphor here for the potential that we have for ourselves to be awake, to wake up. This capacity, this potential of being an awake person—what that would be like—and yet we doubt it. We don't know if it's true. We don't think it's there, this capacity, this experience of being awake.

And then we make up all kinds of stories about who I am and who I take myself to be and who we are. We believe the stories and forget that maybe there's another truth or another reality that we may not be able to see right now.

For us, we could have walked up the hill a little bit further, and probably if we got up on the hill, we would have seen the moon. But where we were standing, where we were located, we couldn't see it. And in the same way, where we're located, we may not be able to see—but does it mean it's not there? Does it mean that that potential, that capacity, that truth of who we are is not real?

So why is it so hard to know ourselves clearly? We've talked about this; this is what most of the talks have been about. Until we really are fully awake, our mind is hindered by the forces of mind—of greed, of hatred, of confusion. These forces become obstacles to this clear seeing. We get so identified with our stories. We get so identified with what our mind is telling us. We get identified with our views and our opinions, and they seem so real. That's our predicament. That's the human predicament.

One of my favorite stories that I heard early on in my practice is the story of painting tigers on the wall. Some of you may have heard this. Long, long time ago, a caveman went into a cave and was painting beautiful pictures on the walls. In this case, this man was painting a tiger, and he was very artistic in the way that he could paint this tiger with a lot of realism.

Just as he was getting to the end of the painting, finishing it up—right at maybe the tail—he looked at it and went, "Oh my God, it's a tiger!" and ran out of the cave. It was so real, became so believable.

I like that story so well because in the same way, we are painting tigers on the screen of our mind, and they become so real that we run. We run away. It's the way it is. And yet with awareness, with mindfulness, we can begin to look and see what's really true—what's really true about what our minds are telling us, about what a formation of a thought is, what an emotion is, what this conception is of who I take myself to be.

When I was at Gaia House in England doing a retreat one time, I noticed that when I would go into my room, there was a mirror on the wall, and I would go past the mirror and look in it. I don't know—I think women may be a little bit more prone to this. I don't really have a sense of men's identity around their appearance. But I would look into the mirror, and there would be this kind of disheartened feeling. And then I would try to ignore it. The next time I'd walk in the room, there was the mirror, I would look, and again this disheartened feeling. It just kept happening again and again.

Finally I thought, okay, I really have to look at this—look at this view, look at the way that I'm holding this view about this image in the mirror that I take to be me. At the time, I was reading some of the texts of the Buddha in the Pali Canon, and I found this wonderful quote that I then put up. I took the mirror down and put the quote up on the wall.

This is the quote, from the Buddha: "Non-identification has been declared by the Blessed One. For in whatever way one conceives, the fact is other than that."

This is such a profound reflection. Whatever way—it's not just some of the ways—whatever way the mind conceives, the fact is other than that. This is a reflection that I have really taken deep into my heart when I start to get caught up in the solidification of the storylines. Whatever way I'm conceiving, the fact is other than that. I can't know. I can't even imagine. My small little mind cannot make sense of what the reality is.

It's a very interesting practice, if you want to do it, to look in the mirror and see if you can just look at the image—the color, the shape, just the bare image—and then notice the thoughts that arise in the mind in relationship to the image. You can really start to get a sense of the way the mind projects this conceptual overlay on top of the image, and then that gives shape to the reality of what happens. Rather than just standing and looking and getting a sense of what it's like without projecting the conditioned memory, the response on top of that image. It's a very interesting practice to do. You might want to try it if you're courageous. I've asked people to do it before and they go, "Oh no, I can't do it, I can't do it." Just to see what happens.

What happens is that we often get caught in that conceptual projection, in that conceptual overlay. There's this wonderful word in the texts that you've probably heard: *papañca*. This conceptual overlay is *papañca*. *Papañca* is the proliferation of mind—the tendency of mind to proliferate issues of a sense of self. It's how we project this sense of self into an imaginary reality, and it becomes so real. We really take this up, the sense of I, me. Sometimes *papañca* is translated as distortion or elaboration or exaggeration—all these different ways that the mind can take shape.

Another chain of dependent origination, another kind of side chain of the ones you've heard so far, goes like this: if what one feels and perceives—with the *vedanā* and the perception, the pleasant or unpleasant or neutral, and the perception—when those two come together, this gives rise to a thought about the perception. What one thinks about, one proliferates. And this proliferation, if it's not seen, is the *papañca*, or this "papañca-izing." We could papañca-ize, if this is not seen. If we get caught in it, this becomes our reality.

Being here at IMS, I was remembering some of my past experiences, all the years that I practiced here. I was remembering the very early years of my retreat experience, in the first three-month course back in the very early eighties.

And I remembered this one time where I was wanting to sit longer through breakfast sometimes. Yet the person who was cleaning the meditation hall, who happened to be a good friend of mine, would come in fairly soon at that time and start vacuuming the meditation hall rug. I remember getting so angry at him. I'm sitting, sitting, sitting, trying to sit longer, and then all this aversion would rise up. "Why is he vacuuming the

meditation hall when I'm trying to..." I was the only one in the meditation hall. I'm the only one sitting there. I'm trying to meditate. He should not be vacuuming the meditation hall.

I would sit through it, and the next day I would do it again. He'd come in and start vacuuming. I'd get so angry at him, and it was his fault. He should not be vacuuming. I never, ever considered the fact that maybe I could just get up and leave while he did his yogi job. It was just this self-righteous sense of "he should not be doing this. I'm going to sit here until he understands that I'm meditating and he'll stop." This whole papañca, which in this case took the form of aversion.

Maybe you've noticed that aversion wants to find some hook. It wants to find something to hook itself on, like a coat hook. "I'm feeling all this aversion. I'll be averse at that person because I don't want to really feel this aversion." So it all went onto him. And he was my friend. He should know better. I'm trying to meditate.

If we don't find a hook in the inner world, we can find a hook in the outer world. And all these characters that are all around us—it's their fault, they need to change. Not only is the projection about ourselves and what's happening here, this papañca, but then the projection goes out to all the other characters. Our world becomes very three-dimensional, kind of holographic, this reality that we're generating through our papañca. It's not just here but all around—this shape of our mind, really, is what starts to happen.

This can feel even more true because the thoughts generate emotions. So it's not just thinking, but the thinking and the feeling come together. We have this whole bigger experience of papañca—not just the proliferation, but the way we engage the emotions, which then projects this sense of reality out. Emotions here and then emotions out.

Papañca is like getting on a train to a destination. Sometimes we like where we're going—that's why we get caught in it a lot. And a lot of times we don't like where it's going, but if we don't have any way to control that, we're just on the train going wherever the papañca is going.

One of my favorite papañca-ings in the early years was fantasizing about tropical islands, because I had never been on a tropical island. My conditioning was to always want to be on one. How many people have been on tropical islands in the last couple of weeks? I don't know if that's your particular favorite fantasy. I'm sure you have other destinations that you've arrived at.

But I liked this fantasy so much that I actually manifested it in reality. I wound up on a tropical island. That's what can happen. We have to be a little bit careful about our papañcas because we actually may arrive in reality at the very place we are imagining.

So I arrived at this tropical island about twelve years ago—Koh Tao, on the islands of Thailand. I had my fantasy, my papañca with it, until I realized what the reality was: it was May, and it's very, very hot at that time. Within five days or so, I wound up getting dengue fever. You get bit by a mosquito and this very high fever happens. People die from dengue fever. I was very, very sick.

So not only did my fantasy turn out to be very unpleasant in terms of the temperature, but then I almost died in reality. Fortunately, I was able to come out of it without too many consequences. But the reality is very different than our imagination. Whatever way we conceive it, the fact is other than that. We don't know. It's just a story in our imagination until it becomes a reality.

In Buddhist psychology, it points to what are called three springs of papancha—three obsessive views that are governed by the torments of our mind: greed, hatred, and confusion. These give rise to this misconception of self, which supports the way the mind embellishes and conceives experience. These three springs are me, mine, and I am.

Me is sakayaditthi. This means personality view, or identity view, or a view of a permanent self, a solid, separate self. It's a wrong view when we believe this to be the way things are. Mine, the second obsessive view, is tanha—the clinging. This is mine. This is mine. We cling to the conditions that are arising and passing as myself. And the third is I am, which is mana, or conceit—this building up of I. I am. I am this. I am that. In Western psychology, this is simply called ego. This is what we call ego-self.

One of my teachers, Hamid Ali, defines ego this way. He says ego is a psychic structure that is based on crystallized beliefs about who we are and what the world is. These beliefs are formed very early in our childhood, and they're reinforced over time through the continuation of identification with those beliefs. This is what gives rise to a particular identity of who we take ourselves to be.

In the Buddhist teachings, traditionally there are five crystallized beliefs, or five processes, that make up our life. These are called the five aggregates, or the five skandhas, which when we cling to them, become who we take ourselves to be. This is what gives formation to the sense of self. I take my body to be myself—we cling to the body as self. I take my feelings to be myself, the vedana. I take my perceptions to be myself. I take my conceptions to be myself—the mental activity, the thoughts, the images, which lead to the emotions. I take consciousness to be myself.

This is what gives formation to the sakayaditthi, the identity view, the personality view. This is who I am. This is mine. This body is mine. These feelings are mine. These perceptions are mine. Consciousness is mine.

But the Buddha, in different places in the texts, offers a wonderful kind of refrain where he says: this body is not myself. These feelings are not myself. The perceptions are not myself. Conceptions are not myself. Consciousness is not myself. These are simply five crystallized beliefs that we cling to, which give the sense of me. This is tanha, one of the obsessive views—the clinging.

But it's important to really understand here that the Buddha did not say these conditions do not exist. The conditions of body, the conditions of feelings, of perceptions, of conceptions, of consciousness—it's not that they don't exist. They exist. They're real. What we are invited to do is not cling to them as mine, as me.

And we have been talking about the why. Why not cling to these things? Because clinging to these beliefs is limiting. It's very narrowing, and it causes suffering. When we identify ourselves in this way, it gives rise to our suffering.

And it interferes with the revelation of the truth. It limits our clear seeing. We can't see clearly because the identification becomes an obstacle to that clear seeing.

There was a yogi last week who came and reported an experience that she was having. It was after Sally introduced the standing meditation. She came in and talked about the experience for herself of doing the standing meditation, and she said that when she first started doing it, she hated it. She just hated it. It was very hard for her to stand and to actually feel her body. And it made her very upset because she had said that she had actually done a lot of work around being in her body and feeling her body, and it really upset her and frustrated her that this was coming up again. Why is this here? I've done so much work. This should be done. It should be over with.

But yet she stayed with the mindfulness. She stayed with the awareness. She really wanted to look and see what was true. And when she really felt what was happening, there actually wasn't that much there in reality. It was more of a mental conception. It was more of an idea that was overlaying her experience. But when she really brought the attention right down through into the conditions of the body, there wasn't that much there. She said it was just a tendril of the past. It was a shadow of the past. And it changed her whole relationship. So it is not what I thought. And she had a much more balanced view. She said, now I know that I'm actually not done. There's a little bit more work I have to do, but it's just the way it is. There's no kind of emotional charge around it because of the disidentification with the conception of what was actually going on.

And I think you can see in your experience how sometimes the idea comes in so quickly from the past about how you imagine the experience is going to be, whatever it is—whether it's about lunch or it's about another yogi or it's about a pain in the knee or a memory that's arising. And there's no, not that, or it's going to be like this, or I don't want to go there. Whatever we start to imagine about it, but when we really start to feel and sense and look directly, it's often not what we imagine it to be.

The difference between being caught in the imaginary reality of our conceptions and coming into the direct reality or the bare experience of our bare contact—to see what's actually happening, what's there. This is how we begin to unhook from the past conditioning, from this sense of what feels so solid about who we take ourselves to be. In this case, the body is not the problem, just the way we are relating to it, or the way she was relating to it.

In the same way, our thoughts or our mental activity are really not the problem either. We can so easily start to think that, well, I just have to stop this thinking or this conceptualizing and then I'll be fine. But that isn't it either. It's not that we have to stop the thoughts or stop the pattern of thinking. The thinking is actually a gift that we have to be able to navigate and negotiate our world. The problem is when we take our thoughts to be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

We cling to our thoughts about our intelligence, about our attractiveness, about our age, about our physical well-being, our emotional stability, our spiritual progress. We can cling to all kinds of thoughts. Just six or seven months ago, I noticed that I started to form a thought around my memory—that I was not remembering things in the way that I used to, that I am really forgetful. And I could see how this whole identity was starting to form around myself, that something was wrong with me and I'm losing my mind, you know, whatever kind of thoughts can start to form around that. It's just sometimes I just wouldn't remember. Didn't have to make a big deal out of it. And just that recognition of having a different relationship to it changed everything.

One time a yogi came in for an interview and just said, "You know, maybe I really am just a miserable person. Maybe that's what I'm discovering about myself. And maybe what motivates me is because I really am a miserable person. That's who I am." We can characterize ourselves around one thought.

Just for you to reflect on this now about yourself—if there's one thought that you seem to pick up or easily pick up. "I'm not a very good yogi." "Nothing spectacular is happening in my practice." Today I was thinking that if we did group interviews, that would be a very popular comment: nothing spectacular is happening in my practice. Or the opposite.

My practice is going really great because so many spectacular things are happening—which is just something else to get identified with. Or we think that other people seem to really understand this meditation so well, judging by the kinds of questions they ask in the hall, while we don't understand it at all. These are just different ways of building up a self-image or identity.

I wonder if we really can evaluate our practice very well. Are we the best people to evaluate? Do we really know? What are we listening to? We're just listening to the same old tape, and then we think we can learn something from the way our mind is telling us about our practice. I think that's one you could let go of. A teacher told that to me a long time ago: don't evaluate your practice.

So just consider for a moment if there's a thought about yourself that you're wrapping your identity around while you're here—maybe just today or in the last few days. You're starting to believe an identity, a view, an identity view. Clinging to these thoughts is what holds the structure of "me" together. This is what holds it together—this tanha, this clinging.

The third fetter, after sakkāya-diṭṭhi and tanha, is conceit, māna—the sense of "I am." I want to take note as I start to talk about this: notice if there's any kind of response within yourself about exploring whether you're conceited or not. Because conceit can have a charge. This word has a bit of a charge to it. We don't want to be thought of as conceited or having conceit. "Not me. I'm not conceited." It can easily happen that we want to push this one away.

Conceit is when there is pride—when there is superiority or arrogance in the mind, some way that we can elevate ourselves or single ourselves out as different, or make ourselves special in some way. We can feel superior about our appearance, about our class, about our gender—women are better than men, or men are better than women, or whatever. We can feel conceit around our color of skin, what we own, our religious status—about anything.

It's these things that give rise to so many problems in our world, and really what drives our world in a very fundamental way. This gives rise to racism and religious wars, homophobia, issues around age and youth and beauty and wealth. It's endless what this view gives rise to and how it conditions and propels this energetic force into the world. We can really feel, when we are caught in these views, how they can drive our ambitions and desires. It's so self-centered, so ego-driven. This is how we can feel and sense this word "ego self."

And this starts very, very young for us. When I was twenty-one years old, just finishing college and trying to find myself and who I was in the world, trying to locate myself in some way, I had a brother who was three years older than me, and so I consulted with my older brother. How do I find myself? How do I move forward in the world? And he said to me, "You've got to get yourself an identity. First thing you have to do is be somebody who's different, who's unique, who's unusual."

So I took his advice. I thought my brother was wise. At that time I had kind of dark brown hair, so I dyed it blonde, and I wore black turtlenecks, and I became an artist. I walked around with a big black portfolio under my arm. Jeans, blue jeans—I really fit the image. And that was my identity.

Until I realized that I wasn't actually that good of an artist. That was hard. That was hard to take in, because to really hold up the identity, I needed to be a good artist. But it just wasn't holding together as well as I'd like, and that really was hard. I could just feel it crumbling. What am I going to do now? If I'm not really an artist, then where's my identity? Who am I? I could feel my ground so unsteady, so unreliable. Who am I? What am I going to do? How do I move in the world without an identity?

But not having the wisdom, not having the understanding at that time, I was still looking for something to hold on to, somebody to be, somebody to become—conceiving myself in some way. And you can see how when we come to our spiritual practice and our spiritual path, we can just transfer that pride onto our meditation. It becomes spiritual pride or spiritual conceit.

I remember in the early days when I was in India with my teacher, Poonjaji. It was a really wonderful time, having some very good experiences and some very deep insights with him. And then I just started to feel so special, being able to be a little bit more in the inner circle with him.

And I'm just so special and I really understand and I really got it. What I didn't know at the time was that I was simply taking up another position of ego, of conceit. Until a little later when you look back and see, oh yes, there it is again. So insidious.

What happens is that we idealize certain attributes that we like—light and open and happy and compassionate, whatever it is—and then cut off the ones that don't fit that image. I want to be this, I don't want to be that. It's just another way of splitting off. The ego gets constructed in a particular way, and we deny and suppress and pretend certain aspects aren't there, and they just go underground. They get hidden away, compartmentalized. Until perhaps, with our mindfulness and awareness, we can bring that forth again to look more completely at who am I, what's going on here.

Oftentimes that construction of conceit is built upon deeply hidden ideas that we are nothing, or somehow we're wrong or bad or evil. And then we have to build up this whole other structure of who we think we are. All of that just gets hidden. Jung called this the shadow—how it just gets put aside. Maybe for some people, never to be looked at at all.

Here's a story that exemplifies spiritual pride. One day a rabbi, in a frenzy of religious passion, rushed in before the ark, fell to his knees, and started beating his breast, crying, "I'm nobody, I'm nobody." The cantor of the synagogue, impressed by this example of spiritual humility, joined the rabbi on his knees, saying, "I'm nobody, I'm nobody." The shamus, the custodian, watching from the corner, couldn't restrain himself either. He joined the other two on his knees, calling out, "I'm nobody, I'm nobody." At which point the rabbi, nudging the cantor with his elbow, pointed at the custodian and said, "Look who thinks he's nobody."

This building up—even building up "I'm nobody." Anything, anything we can build up.

And the other side of this conceit, if you might be sitting and thinking, "Well, I don't really elevate myself"—the other side of this is making ourselves small. Thinking of ourselves as limited and small, which is really another form of conceit: I am small, I am worthless, I am a victim. It's still another way that the belief crystallizes around the sense of self, this comparing and judging. We separate or we cut off in a negative way, which keeps us feeling small and contracted in this view.

But if it makes you feel any more comfortable, it's always good to know that this fetter of conceit doesn't drop away until very advanced stages of awakening. So if some of the things I've talked about are resonating with you, be careful not to judge yourself or form another view about yourself, like, "Oh, I am really caught in conceit." That's just another "I am," so you can watch that thought. But this really takes a long time to work through, this sense of I am someone.

Here is an example of this freedom from the "I am," from Shantideva, an eighth-century Buddhist philosopher: "Even when I do things for the sake of others, no sense of amazement or conceit arises. It's just like feeding myself. I hope for nothing in return." Just like feeding myself. This beautiful flow of expression, of kindness, compassion.

In clinging to this tanha—"this is mine"—and the conceit of "I am," this is what gives rise to the third obsessive view of sakkaya-ditthi. So these three views—tanha (mine), conceit (I am), and sakkaya-ditthi, this personality view or identity view—solidify around our experience.

When we're talking about personality or self in this way, we're really talking about our habits of mind, or sankharas—these conceptual frames of mind that get reinforced through repetition. The way our mind inclines in habitual ways, patterns that we set in motion over time. It's these habits that build up the entire construction of our self-view, or even our worldview. And without awareness and mindfulness, we don't really know what we're building up. There's very little room to do anything differently. We're just caught in the habit.

That's why mindfulness is so important—because it can begin to break up this construction, the way that we hold it. We start to poke holes in the construction, so it's not quite as solid and real and believable in the same way. Awareness is what brings self-understanding.

We're not trying to deny the personality in any way whatsoever. We have personalities due to conditioning from the time we were born—all the influences that have impacted us over time give rise to our personality. So the personality isn't so much the problem as the way the view forms around it, held together by clinging, by confusion.

We're really asking the question: Who am I when I'm not bound by these habitual egoic patterns of mind? Who am I? Who am I then?

What gets expressed then? What comes through then?

This is from Ajahn Sumedho, one of our elders, sharing his practice on working with personality:

"I used to make it a practice to play with personality rather than merely trying to let go of it. To think 'I've got to get rid of my personality and not attach to my emotions' is one of the ways we grasp the teachings of the Buddha. Instead, I would become a personality quite intentionally so I could listen to and observe this sense of me and mine.

"I would practice bringing up thoughts: 'Me? What about me? Don't you care about me? Aren't you interested in what I think and how I feel?' And: 'These are my things. This is my robe. These are my possessions. This is my bowl. This is my space. This is my view, my thoughts, my feelings, and my rights. I am Ajahn Sumedho. I am Maha Thera. I am the disciple of Luang Por Chah.' And on and on like that." He'd actually let it come up. "This is what makes me an interesting person, a person that has titles and is respected and admired in society.

"I would listen to that. I would listen not to knock it down or criticize it, but to recognize the power of words and how I could create myself." Isn't it beautiful? He said, "I want to know how I create this sense of myself." And he says, "As I did this, I would

more and more find the refuge in awareness rather than in the conditions of my personality—rather than in the fears or self-disparagement or megalomania or whatever else happened to be operating in consciousness."

He was seeing with wisdom. So we're not trying to erase the personality, just to see it for what it is: a conditioned realm that is always changing. Always changing. How many times have you changed today? How many times have you changed in the week, in the month, in the year? Who are you? Who do you take yourself to be?

Mindfulness is what breaks up the identification. When we ground through the breath, through the body, we know what's happening with our thoughts, our feelings, emotions, sensations. Knowing—this is what brings us self-understanding. We watch the attitude of our mind, whether we're clinging, or whether we're resisting, pushing away, cutting off, holding on, building up. We can know this. We can see that the conditions come and go. They're not solid. Not permanent.

This beautiful refrain from the Buddha in the Majjhima Nikāya, where he says: "Seen as it actually is with proper wisdom—this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself." Over and over again, this is repeated. "This is not mine"—body, feelings, perceptions, conceptions, consciousness. "This I am not. This is not myself."

Who am I when I am not bound by these habitual patterns of mind?

This is from the Dhammapada, verse three, in Gil Fronsdal's translation:

The mind, hard to see, subtle,
alighting where it wishes.
The sage protects.
The watched mind brings happiness.

The sage protects.

The watched mind brings happiness.

When things start to break up, when the identification begins to dissolve, sometimes this can become quite scary. We can feel like there's nothing there, nothing to hold us, as we start to touch the empty nature of self. This can be hard sometimes. And it's really a time when our faith in the teachings, in the practice, in the teachers, needs to be quite intact. We need that faith as this breaking up of identity view begins to happen.

And this isn't only at a certain stage of our practice. This can happen at many different stages, because there are many, many different dimensions and layers to this construction of how self gets formed. We encounter it in different ways at different times. Yet we have more and more resources to support us, more wisdom and understanding to hold us as this begins to happen.

At other times, when the momentum of "me" slows down, what we find can be quite surprising. We may discover that we actually experience more space. We start to feel more open. Things begin to open up. The breath becomes more free—we breathe more freely. The five senses become more alive. There's more contact with sights and smells and tastes. There's a kind of aliveness or vitality that we begin to come into contact with.

The conditions of the five skandhas are still there. There's still a body, still feelings, perceptions, conceptions, consciousness. But there's not a problem. It's not a problem. The formations are still there—even a sense of me, this me-ness is still present—but there's a kind of lightness, a sense of less solidity, less separateness. And we're not empowering the habits in the same way. Awareness pokes holes, and it starts to feel like there are gaps in this habitual sense of self.

And it's this which allows for something wholly new to shine through—something very surprising, very unexpected—when we aren't caught in the old conditioned ideas. Something very new can come through.

Teacher Tsoknyi Rinpoche says, "With mindfulness, the string of thought that ties confusion together is suddenly no longer tying anything together, and the confusion naturally falls apart." Nothing's tying it together anymore—the clinging, the identification. And he says, "The qualities of the heart are the afterglow."

The qualities of the heart are the afterglow.

One yogi came in the other day and said in her reflection, in this connection with this truth, "You know, I don't have to respond with faith. Faith is here. I don't have to respond with compassion. I am compassion. Compassion is here. I don't have to do anything with it. I don't have to make it into anything. It's already here. I don't have to carry it. It's here."

This revelation—that this is what's flowing through. You remember in my earlier talk I said we don't have to carry all this. Take the luggage off your head. You're already on the train. Let go. Open up. It's here.

But until we know this, we practice. We practice compassion, metta, faith. We practice patience until patience is here, until we know patience is flowing effortlessly, spontaneously. Until we are respectful of what we see in our experience, we practice respect.

We practice kindness until we know that kindness is here.

And as the force of identification grows weaker, as the "I" becomes less demanding, we begin to smell the perfume of selflessness—this beautiful aroma of selflessness pervading this space, this boundless space.

Thanissara Bhikkhuni says that self-identification ultimately dies away, and what is left is limitless freedom.

Let's sit.

The mind, hard to see, subtle, alighting where it wishes. The sage protects. The watched mind brings happiness.

So remembering, as you're getting up and doing your walking: you don't have to get rid of anything. You don't have to get rid of anything. Just know what's there.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 44

Third Noble Truth & Nibbāna

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this profound exploration of the Third Noble Truth, Guy Armstrong illuminates the Buddha's teaching on the cessation of suffering (nirodha) and its intimate connection with nibbāna. Drawing from the Ariyapariyesanā Sutta (MN 26), Armstrong traces the Buddha's original motivation—seeking the 'unborn, unaging, deathless' freedom from bondage. He examines Sāriputta's clear definition of nibbāna as the destruction of greed, aversion, and delusion, while also exploring the deeper understanding from the Udāna that points to nibbāna as an unconditioned element already present within us.*
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> *The talk skillfully bridges the seemingly remote goal of full liberation with accessible, moment-to-moment practice. Armstrong introduces the story of Ānanda's enlightenment to illustrate the balance between effort and surrender, and shares the contemporary account of Ajahn Mahā Bua's realization. He offers practical guidance for recognizing 'temporary nibbāna'—those moments when clinging releases and the cool, peaceful nature of mind becomes apparent.*
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> *Particularly valuable is Armstrong's suggestion to use awareness and space as approximations of the unconditioned—qualities that are ever-present, accommodating of all experience, and not subject to birth and death. Drawing on Ajahn Buddhadāsa's teaching of 'Nibbāna for Everyone,' he encourages practitioners to recognize that this peaceful, non-clinging state is actually our natural condition when we cease agitating the mind with craving.*

The subject of the talk tonight is the Third Noble Truth.

I thought I would start by talking about the Buddha's description of his motivation for his own practice. This is from a sutta in the Majjhima:

"Bhikkhus, before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened bodhisatta, I too, being myself subject to birth, sought what was also subject to birth. Being myself subject to aging, illness, death, and sorrow, I sought what was also subject to aging, illness, death, and sorrow. Then I considered thus: Why, being myself subject to birth, do I seek what is also subject to birth? Why, being myself subject to aging, illness, death, and sorrow, do I seek what is also subject to aging, illness, death, and sorrow? Suppose that, being myself subject to birth, having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, I seek the unborn supreme security from bondage, nibbāna. Suppose

that, being myself subject to aging, illness, death, and sorrow, having understood the danger in what is subject to aging, illness, death, and sorrow, I seek the unaging, unailing, deathless, and sorrowless supreme security from bondage, nibbāna."

So this becomes the frame for the Buddha's journey. Understanding the limitations of what is subject to birth and death, he started his quest looking for that which is beyond birth and death, which he called nibbāna. This was the search that culminated in his understanding in that night under the Bodhi tree that you're very familiar with, where he became fully liberated.

It's said that immediately after his realization, a poem came to him, which you've probably heard before, but I'll read again because of its beauty:

"Through many a birth I wandered in saṃsāra, seeking but not finding the builder of this house. Painful is birth again and again. O house builder, now you are seen. You shall build no house again. All your rafters are broken. Your ridgepole is shattered too. My mind has attained the unconditioned and reached the very end of cravings."

The house that he's talking about is the house of this body, subject to birth, illness, aging, and death. The house builder is craving, which we talked about last week as the source of suffering in the Second Noble Truth. The other metaphors he uses—the rafters of the house—are considered to be the passions of greed, aversion, and delusion. The ridgepole is ignorance, that which props the whole thing up. And then the very last statement: "My mind has attained the unconditioned." Unconditioned is another synonym for nibbāna, that which was the subject of his whole quest, and reached the very end of craving.

This poetic utterance sets the stage for the discourse that he gave to his five old friends when he found them in Sarnath. He had already explained to them the truth of suffering and the truth of the origin of suffering. Tonight I want to talk about the Third Noble Truth, or the cessation of suffering. This is how he explained it in that first discourse:

"Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it."

He equates the end of suffering with the end of craving, as the Second Noble Truth equated the origin of suffering with the origin of craving, and describes it as the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, which was the origin of suffering.

The poem I mentioned earlier about the house builder also ties in the concept of the unconditioned. The statement of his quest equates that with nibbāna. So in the Third Noble Truth, we really get this conjoining of the end of suffering, the end of craving, and this factor of nibbāna.

What is this quality referred to as nibbāna? I don't think there's anything in all the Buddha's teachings that's as confusing and perplexing. Even the teaching on not-self starts to seem sort of understandable when we put it next to the teaching on nibbāna. As we talk about this quality, which will be a part of the talk tonight, I want to encourage you: please don't worry about it. It's not something that anyone can figure out rationally, so don't spend too many cycles trying to do that. The Buddha used it as kind of a pointer for the end of the path, and it's really enough to understand it in those terms, although I'll be trying to flesh it out a little bit more this evening. As he himself said in the same sutta where he described his quest: "This Dhamma that I have attained is profound, hard to see, and hard to understand, subtle to be experienced by the wise."

So the talk tonight may not be particularly subtle or profound, but it may be hard to understand. That's why you should take it all with a grain of skepticism.

One of the clearest definitions in the canon comes from Sāriputta, the Buddha's chief disciple who was said to be highly developed in wisdom. He defined nibbāna like this: "The destruction of greed, the destruction of aversion, the destruction of delusion. This is called nibbāna."

Given that greed, aversion, and delusion are pretty much synonymous with taṇhā, or craving, then we have the end of craving—the end of greed, aversion, and delusion—equated with nibbāna. This is a good working understanding in a simple way. You can see that when greed, aversion, and delusion are gone from the mind, there's a state of freedom. You've been reporting this in your interviews and experiencing it at many different points during the retreat. So the Third Noble Truth is pointing to a real place of freedom.

The literal meaning of this term nibbāna in the Pali—and it was a word at the Buddha's time, he didn't make it up—is extinguishing.

It refers to extinguishing, like the going out of a fire. Moreover, at the time of the Buddha, fire was considered to exist or come into being in dependence on what was called its sustenance or its nourishment. And the word that was used for sustenance or nourishment was *upadana*, which is the term that we use for clinging—the term the Buddha used for clinging or grasping.

So the idea was that a fire could be born of leaves or sticks or twigs or logs or grass. Those materials—leaves or twigs or sticks or logs or grass—were said to be the material or the sustenance for the fire. They were said to be the *upadana* on which the fire depended. So when the fire goes out, it was thought of at the time as being released from its nutriments, from its sustenance, from its *upadana*.

The Buddha took both these terms and brought them together in this sense of nibbana as something going out. And what goes out is the fire of clinging, *upadana*. This is what gets extinguished. So again, using the common terms and concepts of his day and taking them and making a new kind of spiritual truth from them. When clinging—the nutriment, you could say, for suffering—is released, then there's a sense of extinction. The fire of craving, the fire of greed, hatred, and delusion goes out. And that's the state of nibbana: the going out of greed, hatred, and delusion.

Nibbana can be understood as a state of freedom in the mind that is released from greed, hatred, and delusion, but it has also come to be understood as an element in its own right. I hope you can get this distinction. It could just be a psychological condition: when there is no greed, aversion, or delusion in the mind, then there is this state of freedom called nibbana. That's one possible interpretation. Or this quality of nibbana could be something that is already within us, that when we touch it, we discover that place of freedom from greed, aversion, and delusion.

There's one particular sutta that seems to indicate this second reading. It is from the Udana, when the Buddha says: "There is, bhikkhus, an unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded. If there were not this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded, then there would be no deliverance here visible. But since there is this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded, therefore a deliverance is visible from that which is born, become, made, compounded."

So the general interpretation is that in addition to nibbana describing a state of mind, it also refers to an element that is already within us—that there is this unchanging dimension within ourselves. Somewhere within this mind-body process, or underlying this mind-body process, is this element which is often referred to as a transcendent element, because it transcends the limitations of birth, aging, illness, and death. The discovery of this opens us to the Third Noble Truth, opens us fully to the Third Noble Truth.

Some of the implications of this understanding are that this quality is ever-present within us. Because it's not conditioned, it's not subject to arising and passing. Therefore, it doesn't get created. Therefore, it can't arise in a moment, so it must already be here. I don't know if this interests you, but this has always really intrigued me. This element

called nibbana is already here and now. This unborn, unmade, unbecome is already here and now. And it is what makes it possible for us to be released or liberated from what is born, become, or made. As we've seen many times, it's our tendency to hang on to changing elements of experience that causes our suffering. So here's something that isn't changing, that is in a way stable, that is free from the cycle of birth and death, free from the cycle of samsara. And it's already here.

When I hear that, something in me stops and opens up. This is the first practical pointer that I'd like to mention about hearing about this quality of nibbana: it can make us stop and listen deeply within ourselves to see what that could be. Where could it be? How could it be sensed or intuited? Where is perhaps a trail, the scent that leads to that realization? We'll talk more about that.

So if it's ever-present, why is it so hard to see? It's said that it's because the movements of mind are so coarse in comparison to its nature, that its nature is very subtle. And the movements of greed, aversion, and confusion are so heavy that they overwhelm our perception of it. The understanding is that it needs a very fine balance of mind in order for it to be perceivable. This balance of mind is what's pointed to in lists like the seven factors of enlightenment that Sally talked about.

The balance of mind is illustrated in this lovely story of the enlightenment of Ananda. We've talked quite a bit about Ananda, who was a beautiful being, the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life.

After the Buddha's death, Ananda had been so occupied with serving that he hadn't had much time for practice. So while there were many fully enlightened beings around, Ananda was only a stream-enterer. A meeting was being convened of, it is said, 499 Arahants to collect all the teachings of the Buddha since he had died, in order to preserve them. People wanted Ananda there because he had heard so many of the suttas and possessed a fabulous memory. He could remember everything he'd heard—but he wasn't an Arahant, so he couldn't really be trusted. This was quite a boys' club, I'll tell you.

So Ananda wanted to be at the council, but he knew he had to be an Arahant to receive the invitation. He resolved to practice really hard. The night before the council, he stayed up all night practicing—sitting and walking and cultivating the factors of enlightenment. He thought he was in the territory, but as the evening wore on, still nothing was happening. He sat and walked and put in more effort, trying to get his mind in just the right balance, and still nothing happened.

Finally, just before dawn, he thought, "I guess it's not going to happen. I'm not going to be able to join the council, but at least I can take some rest. I gave it my best effort." So he went to his bed to lie down, relaxed his body, relaxed his mind, and just before his head hit the pillow—came that moment of full realization. Then Ananda had a little nap and joined the first council, where he contributed all those suttas that begin, "Thus have I heard." Those are all from the mouth of Ananda.

It's very interesting. Effort can do a certain amount on this path in terms of the unfolding, the opening to the realization of nibbana—but effort can't do the whole thing. This story beautifully illustrates the potency of effort. We can collect and gather the factors of enlightenment through our continuous mindfulness. They do grow, and they gain a momentum that's onward leading. But we cannot control that possible moment of opening to what is beyond conditions. That is beyond effort, beyond our effort. All we can do is lay the ground as best we can, and then be patient. In fact, the very desire or striving for that particular breakthrough will block it.

I think this is a nice reminder that all along the way, to open ourselves to the deepest truth requires an element of surrender—realizing that there's a mystery beyond our control, an opening beyond our ability to cause.

So, nibbana is one word for it. Some other common synonyms from suttas in the Samyutta Nikaya: the unconditioned, the truth, the other shore, the everlasting, peace, the deathless, safety, freedom, the refuge, the beyond.

This condition, this realization, this way of being, is considered by the Buddha the highest kind of happiness. Therefore, it's the culmination of the path. Many different kinds of happiness come along the way—the happiness of sense pleasures, which we've discussed, and the happiness of very refined meditative states, as described through the seven factors of enlightenment or transcendent dependent arising. But all of these are still considered within the conditioned world. It's said that this realization, this way of being, brings a greater kind of happiness than anything else.

The reason it is so completely happy is because it marks the end of suffering. And when you think about what we as humans most deeply want, it really isn't particular experiences. It really is to be beyond the touch of pain and sorrow. The Buddha said that when we realize that, it is the most satisfying—the greatest kind of happiness.

The reason it's so fulfilling is that in that state, in that realization, there is no possibility for the mind's agitation. Because it is a place where craving cannot arise. It is a place of complete safety and complete freedom from even the potential of harm that we cause ourselves.

Just a little overview reminder about how we approach this. When you think about the talk on transcendent dependent arising, you can think of that sequence in two halves. The first half starts with suffering and moves through faith and gladness and rapture and tranquility and happiness or contentment. The second half starts from there and goes into deeper states of calm and then insight. I like to think of the first half of our journey as moving from suffering to contentment, and the second half as starting from contentment and going to liberation.

Now, when you came on this retreat, if I had asked you, "Are you here because you'd like to realize nibbana?" I don't know that very many of you would have checked that box. When I started practicing, I was definitely practicing just with the idea of contentment. If I could have found that in practice early on, it would have satisfied me. But as time went on, my motivation started to change as I began to see greater possibilities. So just be aware that our aspiration is a factor of the path that also evolves as we deepen in practice.

So whether you think of your journey as being toward contentment or toward full liberation, either one is heading in that direction. The Buddha said that the one who is on the Eightfold Path slants, slopes, and inclines to nibbana. Isn't that a nice image? All of you are kind of on this downhill roll, heading in that same direction. We just need to keep rolling. And whether you know that you're going there or not, whether you conceive of that as your destination, it doesn't matter. The practice is such that it unfolds in that direction.

Now, one of the other aspects of the experience of nibbana that I'd like to draw in is that we've talked peripherally about time and being caught in past and future. You notice that even the concept of path has time built in. We begin from suffering, we practice mindfulness, concentration develops, wisdom develops, and over time, at some point in the future, we arrive at the goal—a goal at any rate. So there is often built into the concept of practice this sense in us that we are moving through time to something else.

One of the things that implies is that the fulfillment is not here and now. And the feeling that often comes with that is of a slight dissatisfaction with the present moment, because the future is meant to be the real thing. Even in states that are fairly calm, harmonious, peaceful, there's often this undercurrent of time. Take a look and see if you notice this in your practice.

But when we arrive at the goal—and here we'll talk about it as the experience, the realization of nibbana—that sense of time goes away. Integral to the realization of nibbana is a quality of timelessness. And when that quality of timelessness is touched, the

sense of time becomes much more relaxed and expansive. There is a sense of time opening up in a broad way. Then we start to reflect that there is never anything but this present moment. When you think in that way, instead of using the present moment as a vehicle to get somewhere else, if you think of coming really fully into this present moment, there is nothing else. And that's what gives that sense of relaxation and expansiveness.

If you look at children's relationship to time, they are much less caught in the sense of the rapid movement of time. They come from much more of this place of an open and relaxed sense of time. The Tibetans say that, generally speaking, we are caught in the three times: past, present, and future. But when we touch freedom, we enter the fourth time, which is timelessness.

I think this is an interesting reflection to bring into your practice. Anytime there's a sense of being caught in time, there's a sense of moving toward a goal. But when there's the fullness of arrival, there's no sense of time.

The third noble truth, like all the others, has an imperative along with it, a prescription that the Buddha gave us of what is to be done. He described it this way: "This noble truth of the cessation of suffering is to be realized." This is to be realized. In fact, this realization is the whole point of our path. It's the whole reason, I think, the Buddha taught. And it's the reason, I hope, on some level that we are practicing.

As the Buddha taught, he encouraged us all to come to the realization of nibbana. That means to directly know it from our own personal experience. Again, you may not feel this is a compelling motivation for you at this point, and that's fine. But I also want to bring in the ways in which we are already touching this quality in a relative form. Whether it's in the relative sense or the direct sense of realization, this quality of freedom from clinging, freedom from craving, is met all along the path.

The direct realization, the fullness of seeing nibbana, is what's called enlightenment. When we talk about enlightenment in our tradition, it's understood as the meditator's direct apprehension of this unconditioned element. The Buddha said that direct realization can influence people on four different levels. Sometimes the word enlightenment is only used to talk about people who have completely become liberated, but in our tradition, it's considered that there are four levels of enlightenment or realization.

The first, which is the way that most people experience it, is called stream entry. This refers to the first moment of direct knowledge of the unconditioned element. It's said that this first moment of realization removes three fetters from the mind. It removes the fetter of personality view, which Sharda talked about last night. It removes the fet-

ter of attachment to precepts and rituals. It removes the fetter of doubt—doubt that there is an end of suffering, doubt that this path leads to that end of suffering. Because one knows from one's direct experience the state where there is no suffering and no possibility of suffering.

Now, the middle one is a little bit strange.

How many of you feel attached to rituals and precepts? I don't think many do. I think this was a teaching that the Buddha used to direct toward the Brahmanical teachings of his day, where there was an understanding that purification alone could lead to this quality of release. And he was saying it's not enough in itself—don't be attached to that as the way.

If a stream enterer progresses further, or for some people this first moment of contact will lead to the next level of enlightenment, which is called a once-returner. The idea is that such a person is born once again in the world. At that level, it's said that sense desire and aversion are weakened—not eliminated, but weakened.

Then as one progresses further, or for some individuals the first contact will lead to the next level, which is called a non-returner. A non-returner is not born again into this world but will be born again in another realm before full liberation. At non-returning, both sense desire and aversion are completely eliminated.

This third stage of enlightenment is a very high achievement. I've known a few people in my life who were considered to be at this level, who I was told were at this level. I don't know if they were or not, but from my observation of them, they could well have been. This is the first stage of enlightenment where there's a strong change in affect, and so in emotional experience, because sense desire and aversion are no longer present in the mind. This is a very high attainment.

Going on from there, as one continues to practice—or for some people, on the first moment of realization—it's said that five more fetters are uprooted from the mind. Two are attachment to higher levels of concentration or absorption. And then the last three are restlessness, conceit, and ignorance. This is why we often say the comparing mind doesn't go away until full liberation, and why it's such a hard thing to be really free of. And ignorance is the ridge pole that was pointed to in the Buddha's poem, the underpinning of all our constructs of self and searching for lasting happiness.

This can seem a little remote. It certainly does in my practice. But I do want to tell you one story, because there are people alive who have reached this fourth and highest level of enlightenment, it seems. Again, I can't verify. But someone who is said to be an arahant in Thailand is a teacher named Ajahn Maha Bua, who is a disciple of Ajahn Mun. He's quite old now, but he is still teaching in the north of Thailand.

In one of his books, he described his journey to liberation. It's a very interesting story. He said he'd been in robes for about ten years when he decided to make a strong resolution. The resolution that he took up for one three-month rains retreat was to sit up all night every night. As you can imagine, that's a strong resolution. That's not an easy one to do. And he said that after he did that, he lost his fear of death, because nothing could possibly be more painful than sitting up every night for three months.

So after that period, he said his concentration became very, very strong. His mind became immovable—just like a rock. But he kind of liked that state. So when we talk about attachment to the qualities of concentration, that's what Ajahn Maha Bua was experiencing. And he didn't really move, he said, for about five years from that rock-like concentration.

But at some point he realized that wasn't enough. So he got motivated to investigate again. He began investigating, basically, the noble truths. He started looking at suffering and desire, and then non-suffering and ease. Those were the qualities that he investigated. But he saw that they were all coming and going. So he said, what would it be that doesn't come and go?

Then he turned his attention to the qualities that he called mindfulness and wisdom, and directed them to the quality of knowing itself. He let go of everything else. And then he said those two qualities became impartial and impassive, and the mind was not tending to move to anything at all.

And this is a description from his book: "At that moment, the cosmos in the mind over which ignorance held sway trembled and quaked."

Ignorance was thrown down from its throne on the heart. In its place, the pure mind appeared. At the same moment that ignorance was toppled and eradicated through the power of mindfulness and wisdom.

The key here is his statement that ignorance was eradicated. The eradication of ignorance is the same as saying that one has reached Arahantship. He did that by turning his attention to the qualities of mindfulness and wisdom, which did not change at that point.

This still seems pretty remote. Most of us aren't ready to stay up all night for the rest of the retreat, let alone for three whole months. So how can we make sense of this teaching on the Third Noble Truth? How can we bring it into our actual experience and make it relevant for us?

The first question is: Does the Third Noble Truth point to a permanent end of suffering, or can it be understood as a temporary end of suffering? I would say that for us, it's helpful to understand it as a temporary end of suffering. Because if it's a permanent end, that's way in the future. But if it's a temporary end, we can start to work with it here and now.

One of the ways you can approach this is to look at times when the Second Noble Truth is your experience—when there's craving and some discomfort or unease. It means the mind is clinging in some shape or form. Then be willing to stay with that clinging until it goes. Observe it closely. Feel it. Feel its impact in the body, where there will probably be some form of tension. Feel its effect in the mind, where there will be some kind of rubbing or discomfort or unease. Be willing to observe that until that form of clinging or craving goes away.

That moment of its going away has the flavor of the Third Noble Truth. It has the flavor of this temporary end of the suffering that's coming from the clinging. It may not be the fullness of the direct realization of nibbana, but it is a taste of the same kind of release. So become familiar with what that feels like.

As you get familiar with this sense of observing the clinging and observing the release, these two experiences can become the whole of your practice. In approaching it this way, you might relax the body, bring your attention into the heart center, have a sense that you're going to rest it there, and know moment after moment whether you're in a state of clinging or freedom. These can be your only two notes: Clinging, clinging. Freedom, freedom. This becomes a really interesting exploration when the mind is quiet enough to see in that way.

As we observe this and practice with it, we become more skilled at knowing the forms of clinging and releasing them. There are, I would say, three avenues to this non-clinging.

The first is that we simply wait for things to pass. I'm sure you've experienced this in your practice. If you wait long enough, the clinging will exhaust itself. This is reassuring, but sometimes you have to be really patient.

The second is that you develop greater skill at releasing voluntarily. It can't always happen. Remember that Ajahn Chah said that seventy to eighty percent of spiritual life is knowing you're clinging and not being able to let go. So don't put pressure on yourself. But sometimes we can release.

Then there's a third avenue: as you get to know the feeling of this state of release, you develop more skill at simply putting the mind there. You become familiar with what release feels like, and you find a way to encourage the mind to just go there.

Now, there are a couple of tools that help with that movement. It helps if, in our direct experience, we can find something on the relative level that's a little bit like the unconditioned—a substitute or an approximation for nibbana that's within our direct moment-to-moment experience.

I want to ask you to investigate: What could that be? What could it be in our experience that's always here? What could it be that, like nibbana, can accommodate everything, that isn't moved by painful or pleasant feeling? What could it be that's not caught up in birth and death? What could it be that's not caught in a sense of time?

I want to suggest two possible answers for you to consider. What about the quality of space? You can think about the space in this room. You can think about the space extending more widely out beyond. Does space come and go? Is it born and dying? Is it ever-present? Does it accommodate the beautiful and the unbeautiful?

Does it depend on time?

So space might be one kind of approximation of this unconditioned.

Here's another. What about the quality of awareness? In every waking moment, is there some awareness? Yes. Does awareness care if it's knowing pain or knowing pleasure? Is it subject to birth and death? Is it subject to time? Or is it kind of like space in that it reaches everywhere and is always there? Some kind of knowing.

I want to suggest, as a shorthand or an approximation—a way to tune into this quality of the unconditioned—that you might think about marrying space with awareness. Have a sense that your own awareness can expand to fill this room, and even beyond. Outside, as we listen to the sound of the wind, or as you walk out tonight and look up at the sky and the clouds or the stars—all those things are in physical space, but they're also in the space of your awareness.

So I want you to investigate, just for a moment: What is it like, or what would it feel like, to release any holding around the particulars of your experience in this moment? Maybe you're holding on to some sensation in the body, pleasant or unpleasant. Maybe there's some mood or thought in the mind. Maybe there's a sense of limitation, of confining the attention to your body posture. What if you let go of all those limiting particulars and let the non-clinging extend as far as your awareness extends, as far as space extends? What would that feel like? Does it have a little bit of this quality of release?

Notice also that because space and awareness, as we're talking about them now—just as approximations—are not changeable, not subject to arising and passing, they're always accessible. They're accessible in any moment. So when the mind isn't stirred up or isn't clinging, could you think of this as the natural state of being? If you simply relax your awareness from the particulars, you can know its fullness, its expansiveness, its reach, its accommodating qualities, its non-preference. It still illuminates the beautiful and the unbeautiful, the pleasant and the painful. But is it limited by them? It doesn't need to be.

In this way, perhaps this sense of the vastness of awareness becomes a direct avenue to—let's call it an intimation of nibbāna, the flavor of release. If you get familiar with this, you can start to feel the shift that happens. It's as though in a moment of clinging—a synonym we sometimes use is fixation—the attention gets narrowed down and constricted by some kind of holding. As we move into this wider view of things, it's like the center of gravity shifts from the particulars to a very, very big space.

At the least, this big space gives more room to breathe. It gives room for the body to relax, for the mind to expand, and for everything just to happen on its own.

The second thing it can do is shift our sense of identity. This big space includes the body, includes the thoughts, includes emotions, but it's not limited by them. So maybe we don't have to be defined by our particulars. Maybe what we're more like is this big space in which everything comes and goes. Maybe that's more our nature.

This is from Ajahn Mahā Boowa: "Although all phenomena without exception fall under the laws of the three characteristics—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self—the true nature of the mind doesn't fall under these laws. The natural power of the mind itself is that it knows and does not die. This deathlessness is something that lies beyond disintegration."

In the Thai Forest tradition, this quality of mind is considered more or less equal with nibbāna. And what you can feel is that as you let your attention go in this broad, expansive way, your center of gravity shifts from individual holding to an open and undying space. You can play with this.

Now, these intimations of nibbāna are not the same as the direct realization of the deathless element, of what is truly unconditioned. But they give us a way in, to feel our way in, to what that feels like.

Ajahn Buddhadāsa was a great Thai monk of the past century. Carol and I both had the chance to spend some time at his monastery in Thailand. He was quite a revolutionary in his own way. He brought the Dhamma out of the monastic confines and started sharing it with laypeople, applying it to laypeople's experiences. He re-read the Pāli Canon, the words of the Buddha, and brought fresh interpretation and meaning for people.

One of the things he said was kind of revolutionary—a teaching in a little pamphlet called *Nibbāna for Everyone*. He said that nibbāna shouldn't be understood just as the province of some arahants, but that we all have little tastes of it.

He prefaced it by saying, "When you hear a phrase like 'Nibbana for everyone,' you may shake your head in disbelief and understand that someone has tried to dye a cat for sale." I like this image. If you want to sell a cat that's not very beautiful, you dye it first. You color it and then you put it on the market so that somebody will buy it.

"Nibbana is a natural condition," he continued. "It is the cool state of mind without any defilements." So he's basically saying that when you check your attitude and you don't see greed, you don't see aversion, you don't see delusion—that is this flavor of nibbana, temporary though it is.

And he went on to say, "Anyone can see that if defilements were with us all day and night, every second without ceasing, who could ever stand them? Under such conditions, living things must either die or become insane and finally die away. Let us consider well the fact that one survives because there are periods when the fires of defilement are not burning. Periodical nibbana keeps all of us alive and well, without making any exceptions, even animals at a certain level. We survive because of the nourishment from this kind of nibbana."

So he's pointing to the fact that these moments where greed, aversion, and delusion are absent or much reduced are coming all the time. We just need to start noticing them as the cool state of mind. Moreover, this cool state of mind, as we start to observe it, is the natural state of mind when we aren't stirring things up with cravings. It's not that

you have to force yourself into this state. It's not that it's some accidental thing that happens as a result of a lot of effort and construction and contrivance. Rather, in any moment when the mind has let go of clinging, this is the state that results. All we have to do to touch it, to access it, is to not do, to not fabricate, to not make up, to not construct formations, to not cling. Then the natural state of our being is this everyday nibbana.

When the mind settles in this way and we're not stirring it up, there is a great sense of peace. The Buddha talked about the four foundations—not of mindfulness, but of growth in the Dhamma. He called them wisdom, truth, renunciation, and peace. And he explained it this way: "The tides of conceiving do not sweep over one who stands upon these foundations. And when the tides of conceiving no longer sweep over him, he is called a sage at peace. The sage at peace is not born, does not age, does not die. He is not shaken, and he is not agitated. For there is nothing present in her by which she might be born."

This is truly our natural state of mind when we are not agitating it. At any moment, we start to see that the choice is ours: Do we want to be agitated, or do we want peace? The Buddha said peace is the highest happiness. Sometimes he expressed it as "Nibbana is the highest happiness." Sometimes he expressed it as "Peace is the highest happiness." Do we believe that? If we do, peace is available in any moment in which we simply let go of clinging. It is always accessible.

This is from Rumi, a poem called "Tending Two Shops":

Live in the nowhere that you came from,
even though you have an address here.
That's why you see things in two ways.
You have eyes that see from that nowhere,
and eyes that judge distances, how high and how low.
You own two shops, and you run back and forth.
Try to close the one that's a fearful trap,
getting always smaller and smaller.
Checkmate this way, checkmate that.
Keep open the shop where you're not selling fish hooks anymore.
You are the free-swimming fish.

Now, the extent to which the fish can swim freely is, I think, almost inconceivable for us. This was brought home to me one time when I was in Kathmandu. I was visiting one of my Tibetan teachers who has a monastery there, and I was just about to go home. My

teacher was hosting a very well-known and revered Tibetan lama named Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. Sharon Salzberg had asked me if I would offer some dana to this Rinpoche on her behalf because he was one of her teachers. I had never met him before.

I told my teacher that I'd like to make an offering of some dana from a friend, and my teacher said, "Would you like to present it yourself to Khenpo?"—that was the name for Nyoshul Khen. "Would you like to present the dana?" I said, "No, I don't need to."

And I was thinking, you know, you've seen one lama, you've seen them all.

But I was just about to go. It was my last visit to the monastery on this trip, and I thought, why not? Why not meet this Rinpoche whom I've heard so much about?

So I told my teacher that actually, I would like to present the dana. I collected the money, put it in an envelope, and was brought into the room where he was staying. There was a little chit-chat among the group of us who were there—my teacher, the other Rinpoche's wife, an attendant, a couple of other people.

Then it was time for me to present the dana. I got a little nervous because this Rinpoche was well-known and very highly respected. I went up to him and made my three bows, then offered the envelope to him on my hand. As I did that, I looked into his eyes. He received the dana, and I was still a little nervous.

And then he did something in his mind that was evident through his gaze. He went into a meditative space that was a marked shift. As I was watching him, his eyes moved slightly apart, like he was looking in a very unfocused way, and became very, very still.

Because I was looking directly into his eyes in that moment, I received a transmission of some flavor of the state he had just entered. This experience of incredible stillness came over me. When I thought about it later, I realized I couldn't even say that his mind was still in that moment. It was beyond that. There was no mind there to be either still or moving.

I felt that I was looking right into the unconditioned—that he was manifesting it in that moment—and that if I could have kept looking into his eyes long enough, something might have happened. But I was a little nervous and a little shy, and I couldn't quite get there. The moment passed and the transmission ended.

But I felt I had seen a human possibility that I had never even imagined before. It gave me a deeper sense of what looking into the eyes of the Buddha must have been like, and how so many people were awakened in his presence.

I'd like to close with another quotation from the Buddha about this transcendent place of nibbāna. This is from the Udāna Sutta:

One who is dependent has wavering. One who is independent has no wavering. There being no wavering, there is calm. There being calm, there is no desire. There being no desire, there is no coming or going. There being no coming or going, there is no passing away or arising. There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here, nor a there, nor an in-between. This, just this, is the end of suffering.

CHAPTER 45

Guided Meditation on Equanimity

Sharda Rogell · 45 min

> *In this guided meditation session, Sharda Rogell introduces upekkhā (equanimity), the fourth of the brahmavihāras or divine abodes. She explains how equanimity practice supports the deconditioning of mental reactivity—the contracted, grasping states of mind that characterize dukkha. Drawing from her personal experiences traveling in India, where she encountered profound suffering and her own reactive mind states, Rogell shares how the equanimity practice helped her find acceptance: "No matter how much I might wish for things to be otherwise, things are as they are."*
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> *The teaching carefully distinguishes true equanimity from its "near enemy" of indifference or withdrawal. Authentic upekkhā remains engaged and connected with life while maintaining inner balance—it is not a detached pulling away from difficulty. Rogell emphasizes that equanimity underpins the other brahmavihāras, allowing the heart to remain open in compassion (karuṇā) and loving-kindness (mettā) even amid painful circumstances. She references the eight worldly winds (loka-dhamma)—praise and blame, fame and disrepute, pleasure and pain, gain and loss—as a wisdom reflection for understanding life's inevitable fluctuations.*
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> *The guided practice moves through several stages: first working with a mildly difficult person or situation, then extending equanimity toward oneself, then embracing the community, and finally closing with mettā meditation. Throughout, Rogell offers multiple phrase options for practitioners to find what resonates, encouraging them to notice whether the mind stays vitally engaged or slips into disconnection. This teaching offers practical tools for maintaining balance in both formal meditation and daily life.*

Tonight, I'm going to introduce the fourth of the Brahma Viharas, the practice of equanimity or upeka.

We decided to do two evenings on upeka because it really is very much a support of the practice that we're doing here. When we emphasize examining the attitude of our mind, which we've been emphasizing in the instructions, when we are actually bringing our mindfulness to how the mind is inclining in wholesome or unwholesome ways—really, this is a support for bringing the mind to equanimity, to some balance. The practice we're doing is really to decondition the reactivity. It's one way we could talk

about our mindfulness practice: to begin to understand the patterns of mind that give rise to the contractions of the contracted mind of reactivity. And the Brahma Vihara practice is another practice to decondition the reactive mind.

We might even say that when we think about ego self or our self, the self in a difficult state is a contracted reactive state of mind where we get caught in our grasping and aversion to things we want and we don't want. When we speak of equanimity, we're pointing to the stillness of mind, the still mind that is not moving in reactivity, in grasping, in craving, in aversion.

One of the ways that the equanimity practice in terms of the Brahma Vihara works is really through the practice of acceptance. When we are bringing the mind to balance, to stillness, this comes about through accepting the way things are. So we might even say that equanimity is a kind of unconditional acceptance. No matter what's happening, I accept this. I accept this the way it is. Equanimity is a state of mind where we start to feel an unwavering balance—where I am not going to react, I'm not going to hold on, I'm not going to manipulate and control. I really am going to allow things to be as they are.

This practice has been a very important practice for me, which is also one of the reasons I wanted to teach this tonight. Mostly from the times of my travels in India, the months and over the years that I've spent there. I've mentioned before in my talks how very challenging that was for me, particularly not having been in an undeveloped country before midlife and living a fairly comfortable and somewhat privileged lifestyle. Going to India and really seeing the way many people live on this planet was very, very difficult for me—particularly being in North India, in one of the poorest and in some ways most corrupt places, and just seeing what really goes on.

I would be in constant reactivity. I would see how my mind would get angry or feel some kind of self-righteousness. Things should be different. People shouldn't have to live like this. Children shouldn't have to live like this. This very strong sense of: it shouldn't be like this. And then seeing that I couldn't really do anything about it, I would fall into states of helplessness and hopelessness and grief. I could see how my mind would just be pulled around by these very, very difficult mind states.

It really was the practice of equanimity that helped me begin to come into some kind of acceptance for the way things are. My equanimity phrase that I used when I was traveling was: "No matter how much I might wish for things to be otherwise, things are as they are." When I would say that, there was a way that I could come back to myself

and just feel what was happening within myself without the mind moving out, trying to blame or judge or control or manipulate. I would just come back to myself, back to my heart. Things are the way they are.

It's not an easy practice because the ego mind really wants to try to make things different or try to make people different or situations different—but not necessarily from a place of wisdom, from a place of connection and true engagement. Rather, from a place of reactivity, from a place of caughtness, of demanding and expecting and getting very reactive about the way things are.

I want to offer this tonight to see if, as you work with these phrases and words, you notice what happens in your heart, in your mind. The words themselves can be very impactful as you say them. As you repeat the words to yourself, it's an interesting alchemy, the way the words start to work on the force of mind that wants to change things and have them be otherwise.

One thing that we might notice sometimes, particularly in Buddhist practice, is there can sometimes appear to be a very high value on a kind of quiet, what might even appear as a disconnection or a disengagement with the way things are. It's a very slippery slope from equanimity to what we would call indifference or withdrawal or disengagement. With all the Brahma Viharas, our intention is to stay in connection with what's happening, not to disengage, not to cut off. We want to stay connected in that connection with the way life is, the way life is moving.

But with our practice, we might see that sometimes we can feel like we can just kind of rest back into a stillness or a quiet, and what can happen in that is also a disengagement—which is actually what's called the near enemy to equanimity. It looks like equanimity because there's not the reactivity in it, but there's not the engagement. There's not the connection. We are actually withdrawn and pulled back, almost with an attitude of, "Well, it doesn't really have anything to do with me, so I'll just kind of not stay so present here."

We have these Buddhist images, images of the Buddha and Kuan Yin, and it can seem like there's a real detachment from the world and the way things are.

And so we can sometimes think that's what we're supposed to embody somehow—this detachment. But true equanimity is really engaged with the world. It's engaged with our own inner experiences as well as with people and situations and the world. It's not a withdrawal from the world.

So sometimes when we're doing the practice or saying the phrases, we want to actually notice the quality of the mind, to see if there's a withdrawal, a disconnection where we're not actually that present with what it is that we're holding in our mind around the equanimity. We'll practice with it so you'll get a sense of it. When we do the equanimity practice, we really want to bring as much caring and sincere interest in the engagement as we can.

In the same way with compassion, we might find how the mind can slip off because the situation can feel too painful to engage with. The mind just slips away and doesn't want to be near the painful object. And it's really the equanimity that underpins the compassion that allows us to stay present in a difficult situation and allows the heart to open in compassion. So compassion and equanimity interplay quite a lot.

By keeping the mind balanced and awake and engaged, it allows the heart to open in compassion and in mettā and in joy. It allows for the expression of the other three Brahmavihāras. And it also has its own quality and its own integrity.

As we begin the practice, we can begin with a reflection—a reflection on how life is. That all beings have their ups and their downs, their joys and their sorrows. This is the way life is. There are what are called the eight worldly winds: praise and blame, fame and disrepute, pleasure and pain, gain and loss. This is the way life is.

So we allow this in, this wisdom reflection, that pain and pleasure in life arise and pass away. That's the nature of things. They pass away on their own, and it's unavoidable—pleasure and pain, gain and loss, fame and disrepute, praise and blame—the way the winds of the world blow. And we can reflect that all beings have their own journey. Whether I would like people's journey to be otherwise, all beings have their own journey.

If you're not already sitting in a meditative posture, settle into your posture now.

Just as with the other Brahmavihāras, you want to keep a certain amount of present attention with the body—feeling your body and feeling your heart and what happens in your heart as you reflect on equanimity. Also being attentive to your mind and the attitude in your mind. Noticing if the mind moves in reactivity or withdrawal. And then coming back and reconnecting with the words, with the phrases.

With equanimity, there isn't necessarily one good phrase that I can teach you. I'm going to give you a number of different phrases because you want to see what phrase really works for you and resonates for you, what really speaks to you as you enter into the practice.

We'll begin by reflecting on a situation or someone where you feel some difficulty. There may be some ripples in the mind around this person or situation. Somewhere where you'd like to have more equanimity, more balance of mind.

The first time, be sure that you don't choose somebody that's too difficult. Because as you bring your mind to this person or situation, you might instantly feel the charge of the reactivity. It's good to have some reactivity when you're doing equanimity practice because that's really what it's for.

So it might be somebody here. It might be a situation that's occurred here, either in the hall or in the dorms or in the yogi jobs. It might be a friend that you've had some ripples with, or a family member—a son, a daughter, a child, a parent.

Take a moment or two, bringing a situation or a person to mind. Have a feeling for this. Maybe even feel the charge, where the charge is for you. Let yourself feel that in your body, in your mind. If nothing very strongly comes, just find something very simple. Maybe even some irritation you might have felt with a yogi here coming and going, or sneezing, or whatever it is. Find something.

As you settle in, remember that we are working with our own mind and heart. This particular Brahmavihāra is different in that we're not sending equanimity to another person. We're actually working with the alchemy of our own mind and heart so that we feel more in balance, less reactive—not wishing for somebody else to be more equanimous.

Bring the attention back again to your own heart and mind. As you bring the situation or person to mind, I'll say some phrases. Bring the words, the phrases, to your own mind and heart, and see what words resonate for you so that you can choose a phrase, pick up some words that can be yours—one phrase that you'll repeat.

As you imagine this person or situation, try these phrases: May I open with great care to how things are for you right now. May my heart be big enough to hold the way things are for you right now. May I accept things the way they are. May I let go of my struggle. All beings have their own journey. This is your journey. Or perhaps a simple phrase: Things are as they are.

Check what happens in your mind, your heart, and let the phrases be infused with care. May I open with great care or balance to how things are for you now. May my heart be big enough to hold the way things are. May I accept things the way they are.

Sometimes you may find that you don't want to have any words, but rather you want to incline your mind towards acceptance through the feeling of acceptance itself. May my heart open with care. Be very gentle, particularly if it's a difficult situation—maybe a person who's in a lot of pain. It's hard to accept. Say the phrases and see what happens. You might feel a shift in your consciousness towards letting go, or you might even feel more charge as you bring the situation in.

If you feel a lot of charge, then go to yourself. Just go back to yourself with kindness, saying: May my heart be big enough to hold the joys and sorrows without being overwhelmed. Or: May I hold the conditions of my mind and my body with grace. Whether I understand it or not, things are unfolding according to a natural law. Letting go.

Take a little time and find the words, the phrases that resonate for you, repeating them to yourself. All beings have their own journey. This is your journey.

See if you can stay connected and engaged with vitality in the mind. Notice if the energy is sinking or disconnecting. Reconnect with the image, with the person. No matter how much I might wish for things to be otherwise, things are as they are.

Now I invite you to bring yourself into the field of equanimity, holding yourself as well as you can with this balance of mind towards yourself, finding the words for yourself. All beings have their own journey. This is my journey. May my heart be big enough to hold the joys and sorrows without being overwhelmed. May I hold the conditions of my mind and my body with grace. Whether I understand it or not, things are unfolding according to a natural law.

Let your body be relaxed and breathe naturally. Notice what's happening with your breath as you stay engaged and connected. May I let go of my struggle and hold the conditions of my mind and body with grace. Whether I understand it or not, things are unfolding according to a natural law. May I open with great care and balance to the way things are.

Whether you find words or you just incline the mind towards acceptance, this is the practice of equanimity.

Now I'd like you to open the field of equanimity to all the people here in the room and in the building, embracing the community that you've been spending your time with, repeating phrases of equanimity that resonate for you. All beings have their own journey. May my heart be big enough to hold the way things are. May I accept things the way they are. May I open with great care to all the people here, with care and balance of mind.

If at any point you become overwhelmed, come back to yourself.

Just holding yourself with care.

All beings have their own journey. Things are unfolding according to a natural law.

Taking another half minute.

I'd like to end the meditation with some metta. Collecting the energy in the heart center, bringing your awareness back to your heart. Feeling what's happening in your heart right now. With this balance of mind—not craving or reacting—just allowing whatever feeling is there, whatever mood is there.

Surround yourself in a field of metta, a field of loving-kindness, feeling the warmth, the lightness of the loving-kindness. Extending metta to yourself. Hold yourself with kindness.

Then extend the metta to somebody near you, embracing them in this field of loving-kindness, extending the warmth, the caring to this person.

Then extend the metta out further to more people in the room, eventually including the whole room. Each person touched by your embrace of metta—behind you, in front of you, to each side, above and below. Letting your loving-kindness extend out in all directions, including all the other people in the building, the other people on the land, all the beings on the land, the creatures seen and unseen.

Extending out even further to include your family, your friends, in this embrace of warm metta. Loved ones. To all beings everywhere, in all directions, in all the realms.

May all beings be happy. May all beings be peaceful. May all beings be liberated from pain. May all beings be free.

I've put the equanimity phrases on the notice board for you because I know it's not necessarily easy to remember when there are so many variations. You can find a phrase that really suits you, that resonates for you, and work with that. You can also change it, work with some other phrases, or as I said, maybe for you it's more of a quiet equanimity where you feel the quality of acceptance and the words may even interfere. That feeling is important too—working with that sense of balance and stillness of mind in relationship to a person or a situation or yourself.

See what happens. It's a practice that develops like the others, but this one is really very unique in the quality of mind that arises as we practice equanimity.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 46

Questions and Answers

Joseph Goldstein · 1h05

> *In this Q&A session from the 2007 Three-Month Retreat at IMS, Joseph Goldstein responds to a wide range of practitioner questions with characteristic clarity and depth. He begins by exploring the tension between effortless 'big mind' meditation and the need to investigate suffering, reading from Lama Gendün Rinpoche's teaching 'Free and Easy' while explaining why we still need skillful methods to unhook from deeply conditioned patterns of clinging.*
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> *Goldstein offers profound guidance on working with past relationship material that arises during intensive practice, using the memorable image of chewing sugar cane—extracting insight until thoughts become 'dry pulp.' He provides an experiential demonstration of the crucial difference between casual and relaxed practice, showing how genuine relaxation involves full presence without striving. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he explores mindfulness of the four foundations both internally and externally, including a powerful teaching on right listening when others speak harshly.*
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> *The talk addresses the challenging question of selflessness (anattā) and rebirth, using the analogy of a seed transforming into a tree—a lawful process of conditioning without any permanent element being carried through. Goldstein explains the concept of 'little stream-enterer' (cūḷa sotāpanna), distinguishes between craving (lobha) and wholesome desire (chanda), and concludes with the Buddha's final words: 'Subject to decay are all conditioned things. Work out your awakening with diligence.'*

So this was about the big mind meditation. Why deal with pain? Why investigate clinging, attitudes, mind states, and so forth, if it is so easy? Just hang around in the open nature of mind, let the clouds pass by, and wait for enlightenment.

Well, that's a good question. If it's so easy, why not let it be easy?

As a furtherance of that teaching, I thought I would read just a little bit from a Tibetan teaching about this. It's called "Free and Easy," and it's by Lama Gendun Rinpoche. These are just a few of the stanzas:

Happiness cannot be found through great effort and willpower, but is already present in open relaxation and letting go. Don't strain yourself. There is nothing to do nor undo. Whatever momentarily arises in the body-mind has no real importance at all, has little reality whatsoever. Why identify with it and become attached to it, passing judgment upon it and ourselves? Far better to simply let the entire game happen on its own, springing up

and falling back like waves, without changing or manipulating anything. And notice how everything vanishes and reappears, magically, again and again, time without end. Make use of this spaciousness, this freedom and natural ease. Don't search any further. Don't go into the tangled jungle looking for the great awakened elephant who is already resting quietly at home in front of your own hearth. Nothing to do or undo. Nothing to force. Nothing to want. And nothing missing. Emaho. Marvelous. Everything happens by itself.

So what's the problem? It would be an interesting question to ask yourselves. If it's that easy—just the settling back, not being identified with what's arising, not clinging, not grasping, letting all conditions arise and pass like this magic show—it is very simple.

The problem seems to be that as simple and easy as it is, we have other habits of mind that are very strong. And so all of the methods, all of the suggestions, all of the investigation, all of the learning we're doing about the nature of our experience is really to come to this place of ease. We do it in part by recognizing the possibility and then in a moment just settling back into the ease.

At other times, and sometimes quite frequently, we really investigate what it is that keeps us from it. We really begin to look at the patterns in the mind. What's the condition? What are the causes behind the grasping? How is that working? How is aversion arising in the mind? Where do we get caught? Where do we get stuck? What are the attitudes?

All the methods that we've been talking about are precisely to unhook. It's not to get something. It's to unhook from the clinging, to unhook from the grasping patterns.

I think it's just helpful to hold the balance of recognizing the possibility of this natural ease of mind that's always there—we can always come back to it—and at the same time, learning and practicing and developing a whole array of skillful means, of tools, to help us unhook when we do get caught, to recognize the patterns that catch us again and again.

It's very helpful to remember the title of that little teaching: "Free and Easy." Sometimes it's helpful to remember it in moments as you go through the day when you feel yourself caught up in a lot of striving. If you can remember this possibility—and it could be expressed in different ways—you could express it just in a little mantra: "It's already here," or "Already aware," or "Already awake." It's a momentary reminder that we're not looking for something in the next moment.

We're actually just wanting to settle back into the awareness that's already here. And that reminder, even just for a moment in the midst of a lot of striving—you can really feel the release in the heart. So then it's just practicing that again and again.

Question: I've been having a lot of repeated material come up around past relationships. It's like the whole history of dating, boyfriends, intimate relationships is coming up. I'm individually experiencing each relationship, seeing it clearly and the role I played in it—a coming to terms with this history, with this process. I'm feeling less of an identity, less attachment to these partners. But then I keep wanting to process the material in a therapeutic way instead of watching it in a Vipassana context. I'm wondering how one holds this kind of process in a Vipassana context without getting caught in a therapeutic cycle, while still honoring the material and the therapeutic quality that arises with it.

I think this, in one way or another, is a fairly common experience, especially on long retreats. Just as our mind gets quiet, a lot of our past history—whether it's about relationships or anything else—really does start to arise, often in a very vivid way. Now, through the power of concentration and mindfulness, we're seeing things and understanding things about what has happened in our lives.

My experience has been that it's particularly therapeutic because when this material comes up in meditation, I'm much less defensive. In the actual situation, I might have been acting out of some position. But in the context of meditation, as things come up—and again, this has been my experience—because the mind is more still, more focused, more concentrated, more open, it's able to see things from various angles, from various sides. And so we do come to different understandings. This is part of, I think, a very helpful process. We're really learning about ourselves at the emotional, psychological level of our lives and our relationships in quite a revealing way.

The danger is that it's fascinating. It's really interesting. And it's easy to just get caught again and again in the story because, of course, we're the star of the story. So what could be more interesting than that?

The question is how to find the balance—how to balance opening to the insights without getting caught in a big self-story and without simply repeating the same stuff over and over again. What I've noticed very often in my practice is that as different thoughts or feelings come up, especially about things from the past, there will be an initial quality of insight about it. It may be a fresh angle, maybe seeing things I hadn't seen before. But after a not very long time, I notice that the patterns, the thoughts about it, begin to get quite repetitious. I'm just recycling the same thing again and again.

It reminds me—I don't know whether you've had the experience of chewing sugar cane. When you chew sugar cane, the first few chews are quite juicy. You're extracting the juice and it's sweet. And then pretty quickly, it becomes dry pulp. Really dry pulp. And all you want to do—and what one does do—is spit it out.

Notice when these thoughts become dry pulp, when you have been through it for the hundredth time and you're not particularly seeing anything new or different. It's just repeating. Then really bringing out the sword of wisdom can be helpful. Okay, enough. And then seeing the thoughts or the emotions or even the insights that have come in the context of just another arising and passing away.

I want to back up to the beginning of this response. If you can see the thought arising in the Vipassana context right from the beginning, that would be great. In the context of meditation practice, you don't have to intentionally be exploring the psychological level. So if your practice is in a place where the mindfulness is very keen and the concentration is strong, and you're simply seeing it as an arising thought or image or emotion, seeing it as arising and passing—don't stop the process to say, "Oh, let me go into this. Let me explore it." I wouldn't suggest that.

What I had been suggesting was that if you find the mind engaged in understanding that psychological level, there can be a value to it for some time. But don't over-chew. You need to be watchful for this, because these explorations are very seductive. One could spend a lot of time on that level.

Question: In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the phrase repeats: "Thus one observes"—and then it goes through the four foundations of mindfulness. One observes the body, feelings, mind, mind objects. "Thus one observes internally, observes externally, observes both internally and externally." What does internally and externally point to?

That is a common refrain in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta—to train the mind to observe the body internally and externally, feelings internally and externally, and so forth.

It's pretty interesting to explore the meaning of this. Obviously "internally," I think, is quite clear—we're being mindful of our own experience. But it's also possible to be mindful of other people's bodies, of other people's feelings, of mind and mind states.

Just as a couple of examples: sometimes I've been on retreat and actually mindfully seeing somebody else walking very mindfully. And so I'm mindful externally of somebody else's body. And that mindfulness, especially when they're being mindful, it's like it catches. You can experience how one's own mind stays very aware.

Or we can be mindful of somebody else's emotions. Suppose somebody is feeling happy, manifesting that in some way, or feeling angry, manifesting that either verbally or not. We just sense it. A common situation would be, in one way or another, to be reactive to that other person's emotion. We like it, we don't like it, we get upset by it, whatever. Mindful externally means we become aware in the other person—oh, anger has arisen, joy has arisen, happiness has arisen—and the mindfulness of that keeps us in a mindful state.

I want to read one teaching from the Buddha, which is a very powerful teaching in this regard. It has to do with what we often discuss in the teachings—there's much said about right speech, and we'll be talking more about this toward the end of the retreat. But there's also a whole teaching on right listening. And so this is really mindful externally.

This is from a sutta in the Middle Length Sayings: "Bhikkhus, there are five courses of speech that others may use when they address you. Their speech may be timely or untimely, true or untrue, gentle or harsh, connected with good or with harm, spoken with a mind of loving-kindness or with a mind of inner hate. Herein, bhikkhus, you should train yourself thus: Our minds will remain unaffected. We shall utter no unskillful words. We shall abide compassionate for their welfare with a mind of loving-kindness."

It's not so easy to have our minds remain unaffected, uttering no unskillful words, abiding compassionate for their welfare. When somebody's screaming at us or very angry at us—be happy, be happy.

What's the mechanism that makes this possible? The mechanism is precisely mindfulness externally. We actually become mindful, just as we might watch the anger in our own mind or the fear in our own mind or whatever mind state is arising. We can be mindful: oh, anger has arisen in this other person's mind. Love has arisen. This is the speech that is happening. This speech is true. This speech is untrue. Just being mindful of it.

And in that mindfulness, we're not caught up. We haven't been hooked. And there's a greater possibility then of remaining in that place where our minds are unaffected. We just see. There's a clear discernment. It's not pretending, it's not denying, it's not avoiding. There is that clear discernment: this is the kind of speech that is happening. We're mindful of it—external, somebody else's action. And so that mindfulness is very powerful because it keeps us in balance.

This isn't to necessarily suggest that you spend your whole day watching others, but it can happen. Sometimes quite naturally we're seeing others in the course of a day. Watch to see whether you're being mindful of the four foundations externally or your mind has gone streaming out through the eye door onto the object, creating all kinds of concepts and projections and papañca, which is not an unusual occurrence. But see if you can remember in that situation: yes, I can practice mindfulness of the four foundations. And you might investigate pretty precisely—mindfulness of the body externally, mindfulness of feelings externally, mindfulness of the mind externally—and really see what it is that's arising.

This could go very deep. Because just as the practice of mindfulness internally begins to reveal the selfless nature of phenomena, that it doesn't belong to anybody, it's just elements of mind and body coming into being and passing away—it would be quite amazing and quite a change in the way we relate to other people to see that our experience of other people could also be an awareness of the four foundations arising.

This was one of the great things, probably in studying with many teachers, but it was particularly vivid with Sayadaw U Pandita and practicing with him. One had the very strong feeling in going in for interviews that really all he saw were mental factors.

He just, as one gave the report in interviews, was picking up mental factors. What was arising in the mind? And if they were unwholesome, he wouldn't hesitate to point it out. If they were wholesome, he would be encouraging to cultivate them. But there was no sense of a response to an individual. That was a good example, and it was quite an interesting relationship in that regard. The whole relationship was in the service of ending suffering. It wasn't on a personal level for the most part, especially in the interview context. It was just seeing the factors that arose—which led to suffering, which led to freedom.

So this practice of internal-external is actually very profound. We could maybe get enlightened watching the mental factors of other people. Maybe it would be easier.

Someone asked: What are the telltale signs of a practice that is casual rather than relaxed? And another question: Please speak to how one can know delusion is present.

I put those together because in one way the difference between being casual in one's practice and being relaxed in one's practice has to do with whether delusion is present or not.

I'd like to do a little experiment now. If you would just move your arm and feel the movement. Just feel it with care, but not straining, not forcing. Relaxed. Are you feeling the movement? Is anybody not feeling the movement? It's easy. Relaxed. Simple. But

present. That's relaxed. There's real presence. There's that feeling of being embodied. We're really there for it. And it can be—we could be moving quickly, or we could be moving very slowly, and it can be just as relaxed in both cases. But we're there in quite a continuous way.

So the relaxed practice means there's not a striving, there's not a gaining, there's not a looking for anything. It's completely simple. We're feeling the movement, but there.

Casual practice is when we're kind of there. And it would be very helpful for you to notice as you move through the day—you know, you're kind of there. Especially in the transition times, because this is where casual practice can come up a lot. The bell rings at the end of the sitting, maybe you're going to the walking place, or time around meals, or after lunch. Is your attention, is your awareness like this with everything you're doing? It's relaxed. It's not stressful. It's not straining. But there's a quality of precision. There's a quality of exactness. There's a quality of aliveness, as opposed to just going someplace.

In the casual practice, when we're not really there, there's very often delusion present, because in that situation we may not be totally lost in our thoughts, but there is often a pretty steady stream of thoughts that are coming up and carrying us away to some extent or another.

I mentioned this in the first part of the retreat. One time I was practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita in Nepal and the conditions were really bad. They were among the worst conditions I've ever practiced in. It was like four or five of us just in a bare room on a cement floor right next to the latrine. The food was pretty poor and my mind was pretty grumpy. So I was walking around kind of in a grump. I went in and reported this to Sayadaw, went through this whole thing, and he just had one piece of advice for me. He said, "Be more mindful."

And my first reaction was, "Thanks a lot." It almost felt like a cliché to me. "Oh, well, he doesn't know what else to say. Be more mindful."

But then I went outside and I thought, "Well, he's this great meditation master. Maybe I should follow his advice." So I started walking more mindfully, just in the way I was describing—really feeling the movement. Not straining, not forcing, very relaxed, but really there.

And it was amazing. In that mindfulness, in that fullness of being with experience, the whole grump disappeared. It was like there was no space for it, there was no time for it. And I hadn't realized how much of it was being fed just because I had been practicing casually. I had been walking, kind of present, but really lost in that whole mood.

Do you get a sense of the difference? In the casual practice, there's a lot of delusion going on. Delusion means we're not fully present. We don't know exactly what's happening. Delusion is ignorance. And ignorance is an interesting word in English—ignoring. We're ignoring what's present in one way or another.

So I'd really like to encourage you, especially in these last weeks of the retreat. In one way, they're like the dessert. It's like you've put in all this time and effort in your practice, and even though it may not feel like it—and it may not be the dessert you ordered, the waiter might have gotten it mixed up a little bit—it's the dessert nevertheless. There is a power to your practice that you might not even realize, being in the midst of it.

So it's a very valuable time to really refine your understanding of the difference between casual and relaxed. Because this could truly transform your understanding of the practice. It's the whole day, really the whole day. It's as simple as this. If ever you think you're forgetting, just stop for a moment and move your arm. Just so you remember how simple it is, how easy and how open it can be with that fullness of awareness, fullness of attention. It transforms the quality of the practice. This is not insignificant, so that's why I really want to emphasize it.

A question came in: "What is the Buddhist take on intuition? How would one work with intuition in a Vipassana context? And how would one tell a real intuitive moment versus simply emotion arising?"

Well, this is an interesting question because—and it may not be exactly what was meant—the whole unfolding path of insight is intuitive, meaning that our insights develop not by thinking about things. Our insights into the nature of our experience happen intuitively, out of paying attention. We're just being mindful, being aware, in this very relaxed but not casual flow. There's just observation, observation, observation. And then all of a sudden, intuitively, we may see things, we may experience things in a new way, in a different way. It might be a sudden experience of impermanence. We're just seeing impermanence deeper, or from another angle. Or it might be an experience of selflessness, or a deeper understanding of the First Noble Truth. But it doesn't come from sitting there thinking about it. It comes intuitively.

There's one Zen teaching that characterizes this intuitive understanding—they call it "a sudden wordless understanding." And that's just what our practice is like. We're going along and we just drop into different levels of perception, different angles, different perspectives. And that, in the Buddhist context, is what's understood as intuitive insight.

The next question is really a whole bunch: "When there is no self, what knows? If there is no self, what is reborn? Who or what gets to carry karma from one lifetime to another? As there appears to be no separate self when looking at awareness, what is the commonality to an incarnation?"

How can I have a past life that belongs to me? It is often referred to as the concept of mind streams, and I am wondering about their nature. To what extent are the mind streams of different people considered to be separate, interdependent, or even inseparable? Does the mind stream of a hermit living all by himself or herself affect other mind streams? And if yes, how?

These questions come up frequently—I think they're the most common. The preface is always the same: "If there's no self, then fill in the blank." Because of all the Buddha's teachings, this is the one that's most counterintuitive. For most people, it doesn't immediately resonate. It's like, what does it mean? Our whole life has been built and lived around the idea of a self. And it's so strongly conditioned in our society and culture, especially in the West, where there's such emphasis on the individual, making this teaching even more challenging to grasp.

To say there's no self does not mean that there isn't a coherent pattern to the unfolding. Selflessness means that there is no underlying, unchanging substrate or reference point that is "me." There's no little seed that's carried through.

An example might help illustrate this. If you plant a seed, and there's water and sun and good soil, the seed germinates and sprouts and grows into a plant and tree. The tree bears fruit, and the fruit has new seeds. Is it that the seed has somehow been carried up into the tree and into the fruit and magically multiplied? No. It has been a process of transformation. This is the process of becoming. Seed, due to various conditions, becomes this, becomes this, becomes this. Sapling becomes tree, becomes fruit, becomes new seed. The first seed has not been carried over. But this process of transformation is lawful—it's not happening randomly. If you plant an apple seed, you get an apple tree that bears the fruit of apples. You don't get a mango. There's a lawfulness to the unfolding, but there's no one element that is carried through the process. Rather, it's a process of each moment conditioning the next, conditioning the next, conditioning the next.

It's like imprinting a piece of wax with a seal, then taking the seal away. There's nothing in the seal which is carried over into the wax, but the imprint is there. We could think of each moment as imprinting the next, imprinting the next, imprinting the next.

In this understanding, consciousness itself is arising and passing in each moment, along with all of its different mental factors. All of the material elements are arising and passing in each moment. There is a continuity to it, and you could call that—especially the continuity of the moments of consciousness—the mind stream of an individual. When we look at the whole stream, just as we could look at a tree and say, "That's an apple tree," we're understanding that there's no single element that has been permanent in this process.

So what's reborn? It's not that there is a self which is reborn. It's not that there's some element carried over from this life to the next life. But according to the Abhidhamma, the Buddhist psychology, it's described simply in the same way that we understand this changing process of becoming within this life—each moment of consciousness conditioning the next. It describes how the moment of death consciousness, the quality of consciousness at the moment of death, conditions the arising of rebirth consciousness. Now, the mechanism for this—you'll have to ask somebody else. But this is how it's described, and it follows in the same way as the process happening within this lifetime.

Whether or not you believe in rebirth, you can see the same process happening moment to moment right here. And that's really part of the whole unfolding of insight through the practice of watching—a dual process, moment after moment, knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object, this pairwise progression.

What we call self, what we call Joseph, is the pattern. There is a recognizable pattern, and that's there. We don't confuse an apple tree with a mango tree. There's a pattern to the process of becoming which we can recognize, and that is the individual mind stream. There's just no permanent element that's carried through.

So if we want to use the word "self," which we could very well use conventionally, it refers to a particular pattern of changes. It acknowledges the pattern—that's the conventional level of appearance. Yes, there's a self, there's Joseph, there's each one of us. But on the more ultimate level, we see that pattern is an appearance arising out of a flow of momentary changes.

Just to touch on the last part of the question: if mind streams are individual, which they are, how can one mind stream affect another? And they do. As a very simple example, if you walk into a room and somebody is really angry—just really intense angry energy—do we feel it? Of course we feel it. We're affected by everything and everyone around us. This whole web of conditioning is a web of interdependence.

In that situation it's very obvious, and we've all had that experience. It's also true on the other side, when you're with somebody who is really cooled out. This was my experience with many of my teachers, but I think particularly now of Dipa Ma, who was just this incredible being of stillness and peace and love. That's what you felt. You just came into her presence, and the effect was beautiful. She could be sitting still and one would feel that. There is a very powerful effect from how we are.

Did the Buddha talk about a place before stream entry that us lay people can obtain? If so, how did he describe it? Can we call it brook entry?

A couple of things about that. He did, actually—there is a brook entry. But it's also important not to put stream entry too far out of reach. Stream entry is the first real opening in a very deep way to the experience of selflessness. It is what uproots the notion—I think Sharda talked about it the other night—of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, the personality belief, the belief in self. Our insight has matured to a place where we know with certainty, we've seen with certainty, the selfless nature of this process. That's a transforming moment when we really see it without doubt.

But there is something in the texts. It's not actually called brook entry, but it's called *cūḷa sotāpanna*, which means "little sotāpanna," or little stream-enterer. That is the experience when the momentum of mindfulness builds up to a certain extent and we're in the experience of what's called arising and passing away. We're seeing and feeling the very rapid arising and passing of all phenomena. There's a very strong momentum of mindfulness at that time in our practice where it's really going by itself. At that point, there's not real effort required because we've built up the momentum. The mindfulness is just working by itself, seeing moment after moment things arising, passing, arising, passing. It's a very exhilarating time in practice.

It's said that once we have come to that understanding, stream entry is actually inevitable. In a way, we've crossed over a certain threshold, because in the seeing of that rapid arising and passing away, the bonds of self really have been loosened tremendously. Even though there are further insights to unfold, it's really a turning point for us.

This really can develop in practice. It's one of the reasons I emphasized in the beginning the difference between casual and relaxed. It doesn't happen with casual practice, because in casual practice we build up a head of steam and then fall away. We get a little momentum going and then fall back. With relaxed practice, we're really there in a relaxed way, because the relaxation is a key part of it. It's letting go of the striving, the forcing, the efforting. We're relaxing back—very easy, but continuous. We're really present throughout the day for what we're doing. That's what builds up the momentum of mindfulness, and it's out of that momentum that these insights happen.

There's a question which I'll come to later on, but there's one aspect of it that this would be a good place to address. One of the questions was: what was some of the best advice I got from my teachers early on that helped me in my practice?

Munindra said very often, "In spiritual practice, time is not a factor." Time is not a factor. And for us striving types—"Okay, I'm on this three-month retreat, I've got to get it. There's two and a half weeks left, got to get it"—it's not about time. Time is not a factor.

Can we just put time aside? The Dharma is vast. We're on this vast journey of exploration and discovery. It's not a question of a three-month retreat, and it's not a question of ten three-month retreats. It's just our life. And if we know how to practice, if we know the right way to practice and engage fully—not in a casual manner—the whole path will unfold.

So this is the message for you strivers: just relax, settle back. It's big. It's much bigger than our little striving can do anything with. It's really more surrender to the process, but we need to do our part. And a lot of what we're learning in retreat is what our part is.

A question came in: "What is the difference between craving and wanting? Isn't this suffering because we are craving pleasure? If we want without expectations of either pleasure, pain, or neither, is that still craving? A friend lives in a violent situation. When I send her metta, I use the phrase 'May you be safe and free from danger.' I accept what is but wish things to be different, of more ease for her. Is this wish for her wanting, clinging, grasping?"

This is an important question because the words in English can be very confusing due to their multiple meanings. We use the word *desire* or *wanting* in English in many different ways. In Pali—and this is one of the things I appreciate, though I'm not a Pali linguist, just knowing enough to appreciate the precision of the language in terms of its understanding of the mind—there's much greater clarity. English wasn't developed for that purpose particularly, and so there can be a lot of confusion.

Just a couple of examples. The word *desire* or *wanting* can be associated with craving, with clinging, with attachment, with greed. Here's an image for your mind to recognize when the wanting or desire is of the greed type, the clinging type: just think of Velcro mind. If your mind feels like Velcro, if it's stuck on the object, most likely the greed mental factor is there.

There's another meaning of desire or wanting. In Pali, the word for greed is *lobha*—that's the unskillful state. But another meaning is referred to with the Pali word *chanda*, which is also translated as desire, but it means desire to act, desire to do. This chanda is ethically neutral. Sometimes this desire to act is associated with greed or with aversion or delusion. But sometimes desire to act is associated with generosity, with metta, with wisdom, with compassion.

So in English we use the same word. "I have a desire for enlightenment. I have a desire for awakening. I have a desire for my friend to be happy, to be easeful." That desire is not lobha, is not greed, is not craving. It's that movement, that energy of wanting to do something, but associated with skillful states.

You need to learn how to discern this. Even though we may use the same word in English—desire or wanting—you really need to discern when that's arising in your mind, when you're feeling a wanting, when you're feeling a desire to do something. Really look to see whether it's the desire of greed, that stickiness of the mind to the object. It's not hard to tell the difference when there's this stickiness versus when wholesome states of mind are present. Check it out. It will be a very useful discernment to bring into your lives.

Because without it, and because of the confusion of language in English, we could easily confuse these states in our minds and not discern the difference. So it's been an important investigation.

The word *craving*—that is almost always associated with lobha, with greed. If we feel a craving, or another word used to describe it is a thirst—

And thirst is a good word because you know that feeling of thirst? There's often that craving quality in the mind. So that's the stickiness. That's the greed mental factor.

Now, there's a question about whether we still call this meditation coming from the Mahasi tradition, since it seems quite far from that at this point. This refers to different traditions of practice in Burma, and for many years we were speaking of it in terms of the Mahasi tradition. Mahasi Sayadaw was Munindraji's teacher, Upandita's teacher—he was a great master who died quite a few years ago.

He did quite a revolutionary thing in Burma. He was the one who, I think more than any other monk, opened up intensive practice for lay people. Because traditionally and historically, it's monks and nuns, renunciates, who did intensive practice, while lay people supported their efforts with dana and generosity and followed the precepts. Mahasi Sayadaw was one of the first who, on a very large scale, saw that lay people could

have the same depth of experience as monastics if the situation was created for them to practice. And so hundreds of Mahasi centers were set up in Burma and then around the world.

The things that characterized the Mahasi method: he emphasized for the most part watching the breath at the abdomen, the rising and falling, rather than here at the nostrils. It was an emphasis—he thought that was more helpful, but it was not exclusive. He also very much emphasized the tool of mental noting, where we put a mental label on experience in the service of mindfulness.

Upandita, Sayadaw Upandita, who was a disciple of Mahasi Sayadaw, very much emphasized the effort side. He was a warrior. It was like, kill the defilements—that was the whole metaphor. It's like Buddha in warrior mode. So for many years we were studying with Sayadaw Upandita and, in some slightly watered-down way, emphasizing that side of things.

There are many other traditions and lineages in Burma. There are over fifty ways of doing Vipassana practice. They're all the cultivation of mindfulness, but from different styles. In these last couple of years, we have been more emphasizing relaxing practices, not the strong effort in that very forceful way. It's effort in a relaxed way, in a continuous way.

But actually this is how Mahasi Sayadaw also taught. When he would give instructions, it wasn't in the progressive way that we did here, where we start with the breath and then a day or two later go to sensations and then slowly build. At his monasteries, you would sit and basically the instruction would be: sit and notice what's happening. He did emphasize the tool of noting, but it was that very open kind of practice—using the breath as a primary object, but being open to whatever arose.

So it's really not a question of Mahasi tradition or some other tradition. The way I see it is just emphasizing different things at different times—whether we're really emphasizing the effort factor in a strong way, emphasizing relaxing back more, using mental noting when it's a useful tool. If it's not working particularly well or you don't find it helpful, there's no need to do it. So I just wouldn't make too much of a distinction here.

There are many more questions, and some of them were great, but it's eight-thirty, and I wanted to end just with this last question: If you could impart one message to our minds before we leave, what would it be?

At first I was kind of wondering, well, what would it be? And then the light bulb went off, and I thought of the Buddha's last words, because what could be a more powerful message? Here's the Buddha, enlightened at thirty-five, for forty-five years

wandering northern India, teaching all of these beings—monks and nuns and laypeople. And finally he comes to the end of his life. He's lying, as it's always said, between two trees who, as the legend goes, are flowering out of season.

And what does he say?

His very last words. These words are of import. You can imagine: he's the Buddha, the Awakened One, speaking to so many of his disciples.

He said, "Subject to decay are all conditioned things. All conditioned things are impermanent. All conditioned things are changing. Subject to decay are all conditioned things. Work out your awakening, your enlightenment, with diligence."

It's really profound. The Buddha is pointing to the essential nature of all phenomena. We get so caught up in the story of our lives, so caught up in our desires and our aversions. And the Buddha is just saying: all of it—all of it—is subject to decay. Everything we're so involved in, everything we think is so important in our lives, it's all subject to change.

So what is important? Work out your awakening. With diligence. It takes diligence in the midst of this world of change. That word has been translated as diligence, or heedfulness, or care. And so that really is the message for all of us.

We need to hear it again and again, because it's not a message we get out in the world very much. I'm sure you've noticed—many advertisements on the internet or in magazines or newspapers, just little headlines for some enticement or other. They'll say, "Increase your desire." That's a good idea? Our whole society is about that. It's that understanding that increasing your desire is something to aim for.

That's why the Buddha's message is so precious. With such clarity, he saw the nature of this life, the nature of the mind and body. And it's not esoteric. I'm sure you have seen over these weeks and months: all conditioned things are subject to change. Everything we've experienced arises and passes.

Practice with heedfulness, whether it's in the context of a retreat or the context of our lives.

So let's sit for just a couple of moments. Relaxed, easeful, attentive.

CHAPTER 47

Turning The Mind Towards Equanimity

Sharda Rogell · 54 min

In this dharma talk, Sharda Rogell examines equanimity (upekkhā) not as a brahmavihāra practice, but as a quality arising from insight and understanding the nature of things. Drawing from the Mahādhammasamādāna Sutta (MN 46), she explores the Buddha's teaching on four ways of undertaking things: actions that bring dukkha now and later, sukha now but dukkha later, dukkha now but sukha later, and sukha now and sukha later. These teachings illuminate how our habitual choices, often made without reflection, perpetuate cycles of suffering.

Rogell connects these ancient teachings to modern practice, showing how we unconsciously drink "sweet-tasting poison" when we indulge in sense pleasures without considering consequences, and how the "bad-tasting medicine" of renunciation, restraint, and sitting with difficulty leads to lasting well-being. She shares personal examples from intensive practice, including the challenge of reduced sleep during retreat with Sayadaw U Paṇḍita, demonstrating how going into dukkha mindfully can transform our relationship to habitual patterns.

The talk concludes with beautiful similes from the Indriyabhāvanā Sutta (MN 152) describing how, through developed faculties, agreeable and disagreeable experiences arise and cease as easily as raindrops rolling off a lotus leaf or water vaporizing on a hot iron plate. This investigation into impermanence becomes a doorway to equanimity—not through suppression, but through clear seeing that allows reactive states to dissolve naturally, establishing the peaceful balance of a liberated mind.

We began the equanimity practice last week, and I wanted to explore a little bit more on equanimity—not so much from the Brahma Vihara or the heart quality, but more from equanimity that is associated with insight and understanding, and how understanding the nature of things can help the mind come to a balance of equanimity. This equanimity is the mind that is not reactive to things, the things of this world, inner and outer.

The particular area that I want to explore today is really understanding, again—we've talked about it a lot over the weeks—that ultimately no thing or experience is going to bring us any lasting fulfillment. It's something that we need to hear again and again. We hear it so many times that no thing or experience is going to do it for us. But that doesn't seem to help us let go because the habit is so strong.

So I want to use a couple of the suttas from the Majjhima Nikaya and explore how the Buddha actually focuses on this particular aspect of equanimity. The first one I want to look at is, for those who like references, Majjhima Nikaya 46, called The Greater Discourse on Ways of Undertaking Things. I really like some of these suttas because the Buddha taught over 2,500 years ago, and sometimes in reading them, it's as if he's speaking to the modern person—like it's the same thing that we're dealing with right here and now. It just shows how there's a certain tendency of mind that seems to have continued, and does continue, over the millennia of humanity.

This particular discourse starts off like this. The Buddha says, "Bhikkhus, for the most part, beings have this wish, desire, and longing: if only unwished-for, undesired, disagreeable things would diminish, and wished-for, desired, agreeable things would increase." Does that sound like maybe a thought that you've had perhaps a hundred times since you've been here?

And then he goes on to say, "Yet although beings have this wish, desire, and longing, unwished-for, undesired, disagreeable things increase for them, and wished-for, desired, agreeable things diminish." Now, what do you think is the reason for that? In some ways it's the million-dollar question. Why does this happen—that the things that we wish for actually seem to get further away and the things that we really don't want seem to come closer? And we find ourselves in this cycle.

So the monks reply to the Buddha. They say, "Our teachings are rooted in the Blessed One, guided by the Blessed One. It would be good if the Blessed One would explain the meaning of those words. Having heard it from the Blessed One, we will remember it." It's this taking it in and hearing it again and again. And then the Buddha said, "Then listen, bhikkhus, and attend closely to what I have to say."

The discourse goes on essentially saying that people don't know what things to cultivate and to follow and what things not to cultivate and not to follow. This is, in some ways, the gist of the teachings of the Buddha. You hear this in the teachings, in the texts, again and again—the Buddha pointing to what to follow and what not to follow. Because he's really only interested in increasing happiness, increasing that which is agreeable. That's what the whole direction of the teachings point to: How do we have a more agreeable experience in our life? In some ways, how do we experience more sukha, more pleasure?

It's an interesting thing because you might think we're supposed to give up pleasure, to stop feeling and experiencing pleasure—but that isn't it. It's just about how we actually increase the pleasure. When we talk about equanimity, there is a quality of this

sweet kind of happiness in equanimity. When the mind is really balanced and still and resting, there's a quality of pleasure, a feeling tone. Equanimity is also really felt as very neutral, yet there's this sweet settledness in true equanimity.

So throughout the texts, what we read and what we study is: what things lead us to happiness, and what things lead to more suffering? And then we begin to follow and cultivate the things that lead to more happiness and stop doing and engaging in the things that bring us more pain and suffering. Sally was also talking about this the other night—about the cultivation of dana and sila and bhavana as pathways to more happiness, less suffering. We cultivate those qualities of mind.

So the teaching is on four ways of undertaking things. The first way, the Buddha says, is: "There is a way of undertaking things that is painful now and will ripen as pain in the future." He says this is like horrible or bad-tasting poison—dukkha now, dukkha later. And yet this is a path that people cultivate.

The second way is: "There is a way of undertaking things that is pleasant now and will ripen as pain in the future."

He likens this to sweet-tasting poison. Sukha now, pleasure now, dukkha later.

The third is there is a way of undertaking things that is painful now but will ripen as pleasure in the future. And he likens this to horrible or bad-tasting medicine—this healing medicine. Dukkha now, but sukha later. Painful now, but pleasure later.

And then the last way is there is a way of undertaking things that is pleasurable now and will ripen as pleasure in the future. And this is likened to sweet-tasting medicine. Sukha now, sukha later. I think this is really what we're looking for, right?

So he has these wonderful similes for each one. I'm going to use the similes and then talk a little about how this is relevant for us.

The first one, with dukkha now, dukkha later: "Bhikkhus, suppose there were a bitter gourd mixed with poison. And a man came who wanted to live, not to die, who wanted pleasure and recoiled from pain. And they told him, 'Good man, this bitter gourd is mixed with poison. Drink from it if you want. As you drink from it, its color, smell, and taste will not agree with you. And after drinking from it, you will come to death and deadly suffering.' Then he drank from it without reflecting and did not relinquish it, didn't let it go. As he drank from it, its color, smell, and taste did not agree with him. And after drinking from it, he came to death or deadly suffering. Similar to that, I say, is the way of undertaking things that is painful now and ripens in the future as pain."

The way the Buddha makes the simile, it's just kind of ridiculous. The man is told that if he drinks he's going to die, but he drinks it anyhow without reflecting, without reflecting on the consequences of that particular action.

So how does this reflect for us? How can we understand this for ourselves so that we can gain some understanding from it? I'll just say a few things about it.

Clearly, this is the suffering that leads to more suffering. And it really happens through the compulsion of habit. It's just a habit—doing things again and again without deep reflection on the consequences of that action. What's going to happen if I do this thing? In this particular one, dukkha now, dukkha later, the person is already in a place of pain and then acts out of that pain and causes more suffering.

One place we can look at this is really around the five precepts, these beautiful guidelines for our practice. We can see how acting against these precepts is not only sometimes coming from a place of suffering, but certainly causing more suffering and harm and pain in the world. People are killed out of people's suffering, and that brings about more suffering, not only for the person who was harmed, but for the person who committed the crime.

Stealing, taking things—when people take things, thinking that somehow it's going to make them feel better, somehow there's some kind of gratification that's going to come from that. But actually it doesn't work. There's pain in the beginning and there's pain at the end for having done something that is harmful.

Speaking with anger—how often we're in pain and we actually want to hurt, the intention to hurt somebody that we feel hurt by. And then afterwards feeling more pain from the action that we did.

Sometimes we might think that we have purified ourselves in such a way that this doesn't affect us so much anymore. And yet I can remember a time, some years ago, earlier in my practice, when I decided to really focus on the precept of speech. As a practice, I decided I was going to really look at my motivation for speaking, look at the intention before I spoke. I actually took this on as a practice for a couple of years because I really wanted to understand what was the motivation for the things that I was saying. Where was it coming from?

I remember in the very beginning, as I started to explore my intention and motivation, I was horrified to find out how often I actually wanted to say things because I wanted to hurt somebody, because I had felt hurt by them through some kind of anger or some kind of devious, confused conversation—so unclear in myself around my motivation when I started to look at this.

Until we really investigate more deeply what is the motivation, what is the intention behind our actions, we may not really understand where we're acting from and what our motivation is. Again, without reflecting, the man who drank the poison—without reflecting he didn't let go, he just drank the poison, and he died.

Sometimes I hear from yogis how angry they are at the other yogis here. Now, this isn't going to come as a surprise to you, I'm sure, because that's what happens. We're living in a small community and people cut in line or they may rub up against us in ways that aren't very conscious or take food when other people haven't had food. And we see this and we get really angry about it.

It's like, well, why aren't people more conscious, more sensitive? And so we're acting out of our own suffering through the anger, and then we sit and meditate, and what happens? We just feel the pain of that. Nothing's changed. Nothing's come about through our own agitation and anger. We just sit with it, and we feel it more so. It doesn't work. It doesn't help. It's not the way. It's not the thing to cultivate.

Or when we become envious of what others have, we feel all this envy, all this coveting. What good is it? Where does it go? It's just pain that brings about more pain. Somehow we think all this is going to make us feel better somehow, in some kind of confused way, but there's no possibility of any equanimity, any balance of mind, unless we begin to look at this more carefully—look at our motivations, our intentions, where we're coming from, and what the impact is on the other and also on ourselves.

So the first one: dukkha now, dukkha later. The second one: sukha now, dukkha later. The Buddha says:

"Suppose there were a bronze cup of beverage possessing a good color, smell, and taste, but it was mixed with poison. And a man came who wanted to live, not to die, who wanted pleasure and recoiled from pain, and they told him, 'Good man, this bronze cup of beverage possesses a good smell, good color, good taste, but it's mixed with poison. Drink from it if you want. As you drink from it, its color and smell and taste will agree with you, but after drinking from it, you will come to death or deadly suffering.' As he drank from it, its color, smell, and taste agreed with him, but after drinking from it, he came to death and deadly suffering. Similar to that, I say, is the way of undertaking things that is pleasant now and ripens in the future as pain."

This one is pretty obvious, I think. Again, how we act out of our own compulsive habits and engage in behavior that eventually leads to more pain for ourselves and maybe for others too. The obvious example is indulging in sense pleasures without much reflection on the consequences of our indulgence. One that we can see pretty

clearly for ourselves is if we indulge in too much food—not only the consequences of the pain in the belly from overeating, which is so uncomfortable, but if we're sensitive and we've been meditating for a while, we can also see how eating too much food can dull the mind so we're not able to concentrate or see so clearly. So it has consequences in that way.

When I was reflecting on this, I remembered that we just had Thanksgiving a few weeks ago, and I was remembering when I was here in the early days on a three-month course and they had the Thanksgiving dinner. They put everything out. I think they did that this year too—they put out the pies and the ice cream and everything at the same meal. They stopped doing that for a while, but I see they did it again. And I remember I just couldn't control myself. I ate so much at that Thanksgiving meal. Everything was just so delicious, and the desserts—I couldn't not eat dessert on Thanksgiving.

And I was in so much pain. I think I was in pain for a couple hours before my belly started to find some relief. It was just total indulgence in the pleasure. Sukha now, but dukkha later. Really, really painful. It comes from the delusion about where true happiness really lies. Somehow my happiness was really in that Thanksgiving meal, and I wasn't in any kind of balance of mind, not any kind of equanimity. I was in complete grasping and indulging and attachment, and then the consequences of that.

We can reflect on this too when we think about the pleasure that sometimes somebody could get from breaking one of the precepts—the pleasure from breaking a precept of sexual conduct, causing harm to ourselves or another person by engaging in a relationship that we shouldn't be engaging with for one reason or another. And yet there's a pleasure, the same way—the grasping onto the pleasurable aspect but not really reflecting deeply on what's going to happen in the future. It just hardly ever works out. We hear these stories over and over, how much pain is involved in these kinds of relationships where people get involved with people they shouldn't be getting involved with.

Or the pleasure that we can get from intoxicants or substances—the immediate pleasure, and yet the pain that can come, the immediate pain from the effect on the consciousness, on the mind state, but also the consequences in our life when we do these sorts of things.

Again, I was reflecting on this, remembering back to my early college days, eighteen, nineteen years old, when it was just the thing to drink a lot of beer or alcohol and just get drunk. There wasn't any thought about it. It's just what people did. And it was horrible, just horrible. I didn't have the Dharma back in those days. I didn't have any way to really

think or reflect on what I was doing. Just sukha now, but so much dukkha. We see this with people's addictions and compulsions, the fantasies that we get involved in—yes, pleasurable, but what is this bringing about? Is this bringing any real long-term well-being?

What's really wonderful about the teaching here is that there's really no kind of right and wrong, no bad or good. It's just common sense. The Buddha is simply saying, take a look. If you want—and in the similes it says—drink it if you want. It's not like, "don't drink it," or that it's something really, really bad. It's just, "yeah, drink from it if you want. The color or the smell will agree with you. You'll die, but..." When I read these texts closely, there are such subtleties in the teachings. There's nothing wrong. It's just: do you want happiness in your life or not? And if you do, this is what you have to pay attention to. So pragmatic.

So the third one: dukkha now, sukha later. Suppose, the Buddha says, suppose there were fermented urine mixed with various medicines—and they actually used this for medicine—and a man came sick with jaundice. And they told him, "Good man, this fermented urine is mixed with various medicines. Drink from it if you want. As you drink from it, its color, smell, and taste will not agree with you. But after drinking from it, you will be well." Then he drank from it after reflecting—a little wisdom came in here—he drank from it after reflecting and did not relinquish it. As he drank from it, its color, taste, and smell did not agree with him. But after drinking from it, he became well. Similar to that, I say, is the way of undertaking things that is painful now and ripens in the future as pleasure.

So here's the turning. It's the suffering that leads to the end of suffering. Suffering that leads to the end of suffering. And I think this is really obvious to us here because we can see it in our meditation practice. We can see it right here—that our practice is hard a lot of the time. But you keep going. We keep going. We keep going. It's painful. It's dukkha. But we know that there's going to be favorable consequences. This is going to lead to happiness and well-being.

Sometimes when I'm doing interviews with people and I'm hearing about how hard it is—and some people not really wanting to continue, or starting to get distracted, losing their focus—I feel like a cheerleader sometimes. It's just like, keep going, keep going, keep going, because I can see and I know what's really happening as one makes a commitment in this way. All the seeds that are being planted in this good practice, even though it's painful.

So this is so important to see in the context of these teachings of what to cultivate and what not to cultivate, because this is really how we break our habits of mind, how we bring about transformation—going into the difficulty, going into the dukkha, allowing the dukkha, because we're turning this around. We're turning the suffering around in our lives.

I remember when I was sitting a retreat on the Big Island in Hawaii with Sayadaw U Pandita, who was leading a retreat there. A group of us were there—Carol was there, Joseph was there—and he was really encouraging us to just sleep for four hours. I had never really practiced that way. I mean, I need my sleep. But four hours—do you know how little sleep that is? And yet I really, really wanted to do this. And it was so hard to get up, to first go to sleep, to stay up long enough and then sleep for four hours and then wake up. I mean, I would keep—sometimes four and a half, maybe sometimes five. I really tried to work with it. But it was really one of the most painful things that I did. I made a commitment that I was going to stay in the upright position for twenty hours, or nineteen. I tried. I tried. Nineteen and a half.

And I was rooming with two other women, and they were like warriors. The alarm would go off, and they'd get up. I was just dragging myself out of bed, thinking, "Oh, well, they're doing it. I have to do it." It was really, really hard—one of the hardest things I did.

But actually, I learned so much about the mind state of sleepiness, tiredness, and dullness. To the point where I actually don't have that much resistance to it now. It's like, okay, that's just another mind state. I had so much resistance to it in the beginning, and it really shifted things around for me in that respect. And of course, it contributed to the deepening of concentration as well, which was the whole point. But it was a powerful teaching to go through that pain in that way.

And we do that. Many people here are doing this, sitting with mental pain and physical pain, just saying, "I'm going to sit with it. I'm going to be present. I'm going to stay here no matter what because something's happening. I'm cutting through." Carol was talking about this too with vigilance of mind, working with the difficulties of mind, not turning away. We've talked a lot about this, and yet also knowing how to balance our energy so that we're not pushing too hard, not pressing down too hard, but finding a balance of mind to keep our practice going.

This dukkha now, sukha later really is about renunciation and restraint—the practices of renunciation and restraint, which really means keeping to the five precepts. We keep to the five precepts because these hold us, these are guidelines for us. Or many of you are using the eight precepts as a way to work with overindulgence or habitual

tendencies to greed or craving or aversion. Or the monks and nuns who are here with us, practicing the Vinaya, the rules of the Vinaya, and all the renunciation, all the restraint that goes into that kind of life—the inspiration they are for us in this regard.

So we look at ways we're breaking habits. There was one person who came on this retreat and went cold turkey on her cigarette addiction. Had smoked lots of cigarettes and then just said, "Stopping." The pain, the dukkha of that, really, and to sit in meditation and go through that. And yet knowing that the consequences, the benefits that are going to come from that are going to bring so much sukha, so much that is agreeable. This is what brings the balance of mind, this equanimity of mind, as we start to work with the habits that throw us off into our painful states of mind.

And then the last one: sukha now, sukha later. This is the sweet one, isn't it? The Buddha says, "Suppose there were curd, honey, ghee, and molasses mixed together. And a man with dysentery came, and they told him, 'Good man, this is curd, honey, ghee, and molasses mixed together. Drink from it if you want.'" Isn't that beautiful again? Just "drink from it if you want." You don't have to. You don't have to make yourself well. Drink from it if you want. "As you drink from it, its color, smell, and taste will agree with you. And after drinking from it, you will be well." Then he drank from it after reflecting and did not relinquish it. As he drank from it, its color, smell, and taste agreed with him, and after drinking from it, he became well. "Similar to that, I say, is the way of undertaking things that is pleasant now and ripens in the future as pleasure."

And so primarily, that which is sukha now and sukha later is following the Buddha way, following the Buddha's teachings. There's pleasure. We gain the pleasure from our practice, even though at times there's dukkha. The intention, the motivation to take responsibility for our own happiness, for our own liberation—that's sukha. Sukha there. And the path points to engaging in wholesome actions that bring about sukha. So we're actually practicing—Sally was talking about it—we're practicing generosity from a place of happiness. I want to be generous.

I feel happy to be generous. And then the consequences of that generosity bring more happiness—the cycle, the circle of happiness. Or if I'm practicing kindness, metta, compassion, out of a place of happiness, then more happiness comes back. Or if I'm practicing truthfulness, wanting to speak truthfully, being careful of my motivations and intentions, what comes back is more happiness.

The Buddha says when we feel happy, then we abstain from things that are going to bring about more pain and suffering. Happiness brings about that will, that intention, that motivation to abstain, to not do things, because we're reflecting. We're being thoughtful. We're taking our time. We're not just acting in our old habitual way.

It becomes a kind of effortless quality of being where we're moving from our happy heart, our generous heart, our compassionate heart. It's an effortless cycle that begins to take form. And this brings equanimity of mind, this balance of mind.

The Buddha felt that this was such an important teaching—these four ways of undertaking things—that he said it can dispel darkness. This is a quote from the Buddha about this. He says, "Just as in autumn, in the last month of the rainy season, when the sky is clear and cloudless, the sun rises above the earth, dispelling all darkness from space with its shining and beaming and radiance, so too the way of undertaking things that is pleasant now and ripens in the future as pleasure dispels with its shining and beaming and radiance any other way, any other doctrine."

Really understanding what's happy now and happy later—we're being asked to reflect on the choices that we're making. It's all about our choices, moment to moment. And even though we're here on retreat, where many choices that we usually have in our daily life have been removed, still every moment is a moment of choice. Every moment. Am I going to go this way? Am I going to go that way? Am I going to do this? Am I going to do that? Am I going to have the cup of tea? Am I going to continue my walking? Am I going to go for my nap? Or am I going to sit upright? Am I going to speak out of this anger I have towards my partner at the yogi job? Or am I just going to feel it and stay with it and see if I can bring some balance of mind?

This is daily life practice. This is what we're being asked to do—bringing this mindful attention, this sati-pañña, wise mindfulness, wise attention to what we're doing moment to moment to moment. This is what begins to bring about deep transformation.

Oftentimes it's not very clear what our motivation is, or how we're moving, or what choices we're making, because our habits are so conditioned. And they take control a lot of the time. So it's only when we're present, only when we're mindful, and we can pay attention to what we're actually doing, that we can begin to make different choices.

A lot of new age or mainstream spirituality talks about making different choices, but it's right here. Every moment that we're present, we have a choice to continue to operate on automatic with our habits that could lead us to more pain, or to turn it around, to do something differently.

I've worked a lot with asking myself this question in my own practice: If I continue doing this, is this going to lead to more pain or is it going to lead to more happiness? This is a question I really work with a lot. If I sit at the computer for another fifteen

minutes to try to get this done, is this going to lead my mind to be more balanced, or is this going to lead to more agitation and suffering? It's right there—this choice, which way am I going to turn?

Unfortunately, from a very early age, we're told to take sweet-tasting poison regularly and told that it's going to be sweet-tasting medicine. "This is going to be good for you. Do this, do that, have this, take care of this. This is going to make you happier." The sukha now, but really dukkha later, for a lot of the time.

I brought this little article that I got from USA Today a little while ago because it's so extreme in terms of the messages that we're getting, or the drink that we're getting, you might say. It goes like this. The title is "The FAA Seeks to Keep Billboards from Space." And it goes like this: "The Federal Aviation Administration filed proposed regulations to ensure that it can enforce an existing law that prohibits obtrusive advertising in zero gravity."

The FAA notes that objects placed in orbit, if large enough, could be seen by people around the world for extended periods of time. For instance, outsized billboards deployed by a space company into low Earth orbit could appear as large as the moon and be visible without a telescope. Big and bright advertisements might also hinder astronomers, the FAA warned. However, the FAA currently lacks the authority to enforce the existing law.

So this is how far out things are getting. Drink this. Billboards in space, advertising the next Botox or whatever wants to be sold. It's extreme—I just had to bring the most extreme example. But all of this, you have to admit, is pretty extreme. And all of it just continues to perpetuate staying on this wheel of samsara, this wheel of getting and having and becoming, without deeper reflection.

Stephen Batchelor says that samsara is like being on a wheel in a hamster's cage. There is a sense of never having moved on. We keep finding ourselves back at square one—a life of frustration. Do you have a sense of that? Where are we going? Is anything really changing? Everything is changing, but is anything really changing?

Our mind is perpetually searching for something, buying into the message that these things, these experiences, are going to bring us some kind of completion, some kind of happiness, some kind of fulfillment. We're on this treadmill going round and round, searching for some kind of refuge from our agitation, from our restlessness, without knowing that this very running on the wheel is what's causing the restlessness—this searching, seeking, wanting.

And we can see how our mind can slip off into some kind of imagined refuge: our fantasies, our plans, what we once had, regrets about what we've lost. Something that's going to make us feel more secure, comfortable, or at ease. And the mind goes round and round and round.

You might see it here on retreat. You have your fantasies, but also fantasies about food and the gratification it's going to give us. Or our clothing—the kind of clothing we wear, the kind of zafu we're sitting on, all our paraphernalia around our zafus, the benches and chairs, our cups and dishes. It just goes on and on—all these things that are going to do it for us.

So finding this balance of mind, this equanimity, this stillness where we let go—the Buddha says that we need to develop our mind. We need to develop our mind to learn how to control it so that we don't get so pulled into the agreeable attributes of things or the disagreeable attributes of things. When we start to understand how the mind gets pulled in, this is how it can begin to find some balance, come to a place of equilibrium. Otherwise, the mind gets glued or stuck to objects that are essentially empty of any kind of substance.

This perception of something being solid or real—we stick to it. And because there really isn't much there, that thing is completely unreliable to give us any kind of lasting fulfillment, because it falls apart. Things arise and pass, arise and pass. There's not really much there. And when we get stuck on things as if they're so solid, it's really hard to let go, and our mind becomes obsessed with holding on. That's the attachment. We become obsessed with these things.

One of the commentaries says that the mind is stuck, fastened to the object like flies to a ball of sugar. If you've been in Asia, if you've been in India, that is such a great metaphor because that's what you see. In the lanes and different stalls are these flies stuck to balls of sugar, on different cookies and candies, all kinds of sweets with flies all over them. It's right from the time of the Buddha. And in places in India which are timeless, which haven't changed, it's still the same. It's just such a great metaphor for what happens to the mind.

Reflecting on this, I remembered one time on an early three-month course. People sometimes would put little chocolates and things on pillows or in cups. I don't know if people still do that—we don't hear so much about it on this side. But one time somebody put one of those small Reese's peanut butter cups, wrapped in aluminum foil. And they're wrapped so well. If you've ever had a Reese's peanut butter cup, the foil goes right into the ridges, and when you take the foil off, it's just this yummy chocolate.

I got so excited because I hadn't had anything like this in weeks. So I took it up to my room and put it in a spot, and I knew there was a certain time I was going to eat this, but I was going to wait because I really wanted to be in the right mind state. I really wanted to be able to enjoy it. It just sat there on the little windowsill, and I would look at it and covet it for a few days.

Then the right moment came, and very mindfully I took off the foil—that wonderful foil around the chocolate—and put a bite into my mouth and chewed it, tasted it. It was fantastic. Took another bite, chewed it, tasted it.

It was fantastic. And in thirty seconds, it was over. Thirty seconds. I had spent two days building up this experience. It was going to be the highlight. And it went by so fast. Wait a minute, I'm just starting. I'm just getting into it, and it's over already.

I had one of the biggest insights into anicca at that moment. It was just so apparent that this thing I had given so much meaning to, that had held so much of my happiness—it was just gone, and I was left empty-handed. It was a wonderful experience for me, showing me that I cannot hold on.

But it's not that everything is going to be unsatisfactory. It's not that there's no satisfaction. The Buddha said—or it might be from a Tibetan lama, I'm not certain—"The beautiful things of this world remain so, but the noble one no longer strives after them." Things are still beautiful, things are still gratifying, but we don't have to hold on.

So the Buddha gives teachings on how to develop our mind, to investigate the nature of things, and to train the mind so that we're not grasping onto the agreeable and disagreeable attributes. This is really what brings about an establishment in equanimity—this equanimity associated with insight knowledge, where because we understand, we're not attached or aversive or angry in the same way.

As I finish this talk tonight, I want to read some beautiful similes from another sutta, Majjhima Nikaya 152, where the Buddha speaks about this development:

"When one sees a form, a sound, an odor, flavor, a felt sense, or a mind object with the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind, there arises in one what is agreeable, what is disagreeable, and what is indifferent. One understands that this has arisen, that this is conditioned and dependently arisen. What is peaceful and sublime is equanimity. The agreeable, the disagreeable, and the indifferent that arose cease, and equanimity is established."

This is called the supreme development of the faculties, or the five senses. And these similes the Buddha uses are so beautiful. Each one goes through each of the five senses and mind objects. You can hear in the Buddha's words the very feeling of the sense base itself that he's referring to.

The first is eyes and the forms that arise with seeing: "When one sees a form with the eyes, just as a man with good sight having opened his eyes might shut them, or having shut his eyes might open them, so too concerning anything at all, the agreeable, disagreeable, and indifferent that arose cease just as quickly, just as rapidly, just as easily, and equanimity is established."

"When one hears a sound with the ear, just as a strong man might easily snap his fingers, so too concerning anything at all, the agreeable, the disagreeable, the indifferent that arose cease just as quickly, rapidly, easily, and equanimity is established."

"When one smells an odor with the nose, just as raindrops on a slightly sloping lotus leaf roll off and do not remain there, so too concerning anything at all, the agreeable, the disagreeable, and the indifferent that arose cease just as quickly, rapidly, easily, and equanimity is established."

"When one tastes a flavor with the tongue, just as a strong man might easily spit a ball of spittle collected on the tip of his tongue, so too concerning anything at all, the agreeable, disagreeable, and indifferent that arose cease just as quickly, rapidly, easily, and equanimity is established."

"When one touches a tangible with the body, just as a strong man might extend his flexed arm or flex his extended arm, so too concerning anything at all, the agreeable, disagreeable, and indifferent that arose cease just as quickly, rapidly, easily, and equanimity is established."

And this one is my favorite: "When one recognizes a mind object with the mind, just as if a man were to let two or three drops of water fall onto an iron plate heated for a whole day—the falling of the drops might be slow, but they would quickly vaporize and vanish—so too concerning anything at all, the agreeable, disagreeable, and indifferent that arose cease just as quickly, rapidly, easily, and equanimity is established."

We can begin to see this in our practice, in our meditation, and understand that a doorway to equanimity is this direct investigation into the impermanent nature of things. When we see clearly the arising and falling, when we notice our reactions to that which is pleasurable and that which is painful, and we don't follow them, we don't cultivate those reactive states of mind—the seeing of it too just appears and disappears easily, quickly, when we pay attention in this way.

So this is the medicine being prescribed for us. Of course, it isn't always sweet-tasting medicine. We know that. And yet it is medicine. This is the medicine given to us that will lead us down the path to more happiness, to more liberation, to freedom. It's not that we have to—but take it if you would like to. It's up to you.

Let's sit for a minute.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 48

Loving-Kindness and Gratitude

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the four brahmavihāras (divine abidings) with special attention to loving-kindness (mettā) and appreciative joy (muditā). He presents these practices as profound tools for navigating the constant alternation of pleasure and pain that characterizes human existence—a condition the Buddha identified as ideal for awakening.*
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> *Armstrong explains the structural relationship between the brahmavihāras: mettā forms the foundation, naturally transforming into compassion (karuṇā) when meeting suffering and into muditā when encountering happiness, while equanimity (upekkhā) provides the stability to sustain these wholesome states. He shares moving stories illustrating these qualities in action, from a Western monk in Thailand whose fifteen years of practice transformed deep self-hatred into radiant loving-kindness, to young practitioners stopping traffic to help a mother duck and her ducklings cross the road.*
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> *The talk explores the progression of mettā practice through its traditional categories—self, benefactor, neutral person, and difficult person—with particular insight into how working with the difficult person reveals the crucial distinction between ill-will and goodwill. Armstrong introduces gratitude as the flavor muditā takes when directed toward oneself, and connects these practices to the Tibetan concept of bodhicitta, the awakening mind that unites compassion with the wisdom of emptiness. Drawing on teachings from the Dalai Lama and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, he points toward how the realization of anattā (non-self) ultimately supports unshakeable equanimity.*

One of the qualities we discover on a long retreat is what sensitive creatures we are. Being in the present moment, we find that we're subjected to this constantly varying stream of pleasant experience and painful experience. That alternation never seems to end.

It's said that because of this, the human realm is considered to be the best realm to wake up from. Things are difficult enough that we have a motivation to look and become free, but they're pleasurable enough that we have enough hope and confidence that we can become free. So I hope you are counting your blessings at having this mix of pleasure and pain. It may not be the best for enjoyment, but it's the best for enlightenment.

We recognize as we're practicing that really anything can happen at any moment in life. That's part of what makes it uncertain, and out of the uncertainty, somewhat intense.

Just a story to illustrate this: a friend of ours a few years ago was practicing Qigong on a beach in southern India. The date happened to be December 26, 2004. As he was out on the beach taking in the morning sun, this big wave started to roll in and knocked him over, flattened him. There he was, knocked on the sand. He said he stood up and looked back at the ocean to see what was going on, and he saw this very strange characteristic of an emptiness where the wave had been and where the ocean should be. It was the emptiness that freaked him out, so he ran and got his partner. The two of them came outside and climbed up on top of this concrete wall, and he held on very tight to a palm tree that was right beside the wall.

Just then, the second wave came. That's the wave that, as you probably remember, was the tsunami of 2004 that took many people out in its wake. But because he'd had the foresight to climb on the concrete wall, which was about three feet tall, and hang on to a palm tree, they were able to stay upright during the impact of that second big wave.

Anything can happen. This was a case where the practice of non-clinging was not advisable. He was fortunate enough to realize that.

So given this alternation in our practice, in our immediate experience, as well as in our outside life, how do we respond to all the changes that life brings? How do we respond to this changing mix of joy and sorrow that really is the situation for all humans that are alive?

If we look at the state of the world today, it's quite easy to get depressed. If you read the news pages, it's mostly bad news. You notice they never report on a monk in Thailand getting enlightened today. That never makes the front page. Mostly what makes the front page is not good news. It's also easy to get kind of depressed about the state of our mind as we follow it moment by moment here. Sometimes the enlightenment story doesn't show up here so clearly either.

But fortunately we have these tools that give us other ways to relate. Among the tools that show us another possibility are the Brahma Viharas. Tonight I want to talk about the Brahma Viharas, particularly the two that we haven't talked about much in this six-week period: loving-kindness and appreciative joy, metta and mudita.

To back up a minute and look at the structure of these four qualities of mind called the divine abidings—the place where we can find a heavenly state of mind within ourselves. In our tradition, we consider that metta is the foundation for all the Brahma Viharas. In the practice of metta, which you all did in the first six weeks if you were here, we consistently turn our mind to the well-being of individuals, of ourselves and other individuals, with the wish: may you be well and happy and peaceful and healthy.

This consistent turning of the mind to welfare, eventually of all beings, starts to train the heart to be open—or you could say tender—around the subject of people's happiness or unhappiness. That's one of the great movements that happens in the practice of loving-kindness. We start, as a matter of habit or practice, to tune in every time we meet a being: How are you doing? How is your health? How is your state of mind? Are you feeling safe? These issues start to matter to us, for ourselves and for others. This is how the heart starts to open.

Then this open heart becomes the platform for the next two—really, you could say the next three. When that open heart looks on someone who's having a difficult time, the natural flavor that comes out is compassion. It's not that compassion is such a radically different state than loving-kindness; it's just a transmutation of it when loving-kindness looks on suffering.

On the other hand, when that open heart of loving-kindness looks on somebody who's going through happiness and uplift in their life, then the flavor that evokes is mudita, or appreciative joy. We resonate in sympathy with people's suffering or happiness.

So there's this beautiful symmetry. Loving-kindness is the foundation. Compassion is the natural response to difficulty. And appreciative joy is the natural response to well-being or happiness.

Then the fourth factor—equanimity—balances and holds all three, basically so that they don't fall into their near and far enemies. Equanimity is the quality of mind that provides the strength so that we can stay in the divine abidings rather than their opposites or their near enemies. So they all work together to support one another. They're all needed to complete the picture.

We have this beautiful gift from the tradition from nearly 2,500 years ago. It's not recorded in the suttas that the Buddha taught these practices exactly the way that we do them, but it's taught in a commentary that came into existence perhaps 200 years after the Buddha. So these practices, in the way we do them, go back about 2,300 years for sure. They have been tested once or twice. They have been found to work.

The beautiful thing is that as we develop them, they really do have the power to evoke these qualities of our being, and in doing that, they sweeten our lives. They bring our emotional life up into a realm that is very worthwhile, very beneficial for ourselves and others. They strengthen the emotional life, they bring it into more realization, and they do it in this very wholesome way.

Some people don't particularly feel drawn to practice the Brahma Viharas, and that's fine. If you have tried the Brahma Viharas and don't connect, you can stay with Vipassana, and over time, all these qualities are also unfolded from Vipassana. I tend to think that they unfold more strongly with the support of the Brahma Viharas, but they also will unfold from Vipassana.

This is from Rumi: "Someone who does not run toward the allure of love walks a road where nothing lives." But you don't have to practice loving kindness. It's your choice.

So we begin with the foundation of loving kindness, and we start practicing metta usually for ourselves because it's said to be the easiest—when in fact it often turns out for many of us to be one of the most difficult. But we start with metta for self, and it's actually designed to evoke the areas where it's difficult. As we aim our orientation toward appreciation and well-wishing, we find all the attitudes of mind that collide with that, that don't support it. For many of us, turning the attitude toward well-wishing brings up its opposite, which are ways that we don't feel so great about ourselves. As we turn toward metta, we often find that we encounter a lot of self-judgment, a lot of criticism, a lot of ill will directed toward ourselves.

And we have the opportunity then to get really familiar with this judging mind, which we've talked about a lot on this retreat. Very helpful to get well acquainted, because the judge is kind of a difficult customer, as I know you've seen. The judge tends to be a very tough, stern, critical, demanding taskmaster within us. Elements of perhaps the least attractive parts of our parents' personalities often seem to get directly channeled into that figure.

So how can we meet the judge in a way that's helpful? The best way to meet that hardness is with softness. If we can soften when that hard voice is coming in, then we don't have to be so caught in its hard nature. The turning of the mind to either metta or compassion is the way to evoke an attitude of softness to meet this hard-edged quality coming from the judge. When we can stay with some kind of softness for a while, then it starts to touch other things. When we're feeling soft inside—or merciful, you might say—it's not extended just to ourselves; it's extended outward as well. And that's what brings some kind of change.

This is from Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan teacher: "It is as if we had a pimple on our body that was very sore, so sore that we do not want to rub it or scratch it. During our shower, we do not want to rub too much soap over it because it hurts. The sore spot on our body is an analogy for tenderness. Why? Because even in the midst of aggression, insensitivity, or laziness in our life, we always have a soft spot, some point we can cultivate. A more vivid analogy might be of an open wound, which is always there. That open wound is usually very inconvenient and problematic. We would like to be tough. We would like to come on strong. But there will always be a sore spot. At least we are accessible somewhere. So we are not completely covered with a suit of armor all the time. What a relief."

So this soft spot, even though it exposes our vulnerability, turns out to be the avenue to opening ourselves and allowing that open quality to touch us, to change us, and eventually to touch the world. As we start to trust in that softness, that tenderness, that very movement starts to weaken the influence of the judge. It can't maintain that hard-edged attack in the face of our softness. But we have to be patient with this process. It can take time to transform the judge's attitude. The judge has a lot of momentum, a lot of habit patterns.

When I was ordained as a monk in Thailand quite a while ago, in the 80s, my preceptor was a really wonderful monk who had a monastery outside of Thailand. He just died a couple of months ago this year. He was in his 90s when he died.

His name was Ajahn Panyananda. There's a wonderful book that recounts part of his life as a young monk called *Sons of the Buddha*. At any rate, he was very kind and helpful to me, ordained me, and then allowed me to go to another monastery in the forest to practice.

But he said, "While you're on your way to this other monastery"—which was up north near Chiang Mai—"stop in at one of my branch monasteries." It was actually a place where he had gotten quite established as a young monk, a monastery in the town of Chiang Mai. I said that sounds great, I can break my journey up and it will be interesting to stay there.

So I got to this wat in Chiang Mai and there was another Western monk there who took me around, showed me the ropes, took me on alms round. We had some really lovely conversations. The first day I was there we went on alms round together, and he went in front because he was a senior monk. He'd been in robes for fifteen years at that point. I'd been in robes for about two weeks, so I was definitely a junior. And then,

oddly enough, behind me there were two novice monks, which doesn't usually happen—the novice monks don't usually go out on alms round. I wasn't sure what was up, but I was just following him.

He walked down this street in Chiang Mai, and there were all these people lined up waiting to give him alms because they had known him for a long time. They knew his route, they knew what time he came, and they were waiting. They put lots of food in his bowl. I followed behind. They put lots of food in my bowl. He and I both filled our bowls. My bowl was sort of ordinary looking, but his bowl was the biggest bowl I've ever seen. And it was appropriate because he had a girth to match the size of his bowl. He was obviously well-fed, which not all monks in Asia are, but he was well taken care of.

I came to understand that it was because of his generous spirit—he really exhibited a lot of loving-kindness. His practice was that he would sit at his kuti in the morning at a nice little place by a pond. He would meditate there in the morning, and in the afternoon he would receive visitors. He spoke fluent Thai at this point, so many local people would come and talk to him about their meditation practice. They would ask his advice about their family and raising their children, and he would just give selflessly of his time to these people. That was why, I think, his alms round was so well supported. And that's the exchange that is meant to happen between the monks and nuns and the lay people in Buddhist countries.

So we had both filled up our bowls, and for some reason then—I didn't know why—we ducked into an alley. He led and I followed. The novices followed us in. Then they opened up their robes, and each one had hanging off their left shoulder a big plastic bag. We took all the food offerings, which were in little plastic bags, out of our bowls and put them in the novices' plastic bags. The novices closed up their robes. We put the lids on our bowls, went out on the street again and filled up again. I think we did this once more.

When we got back to the monastery, the novices' bags were jammed with food offerings. Our bowls were still full. We had more than enough for ourselves. We shared with other people who hadn't gone out on alms round. We shared with all the lay people who were staying at the monastery, and then we shared with the dogs. There was enough to feed everyone based on this monk's generosity and loving-kindness. That's why we were so well supported on that walk.

I was very touched and inspired by his being. He had this really lovely, outgoing nature. So I got to talking to him about his practice, and as we chatted over the next couple of days, I was really surprised when he told me that it wasn't always like that for him. He said, "I spent the first nine years that I was in robes working through my self-hatred."

Nine years. But the transformation in him was so full, so complete, so apparent. He had developed, through a combination of mindfulness and loving-kindness, this great open heart of metta.

So we begin with ourselves, then move on to a benefactor or friend. This is a really important person in our metta family because this tends to be the person who can pick our heart up. If in retreat we're feeling a little down, if our spirits are low, it's wonderful to have a benefactor or friend.

whom we connect with with a lot of affection, because that can elevate our mood, inspire us, and keep us going. Then we can bring that kind of uplifted mind back into doing the metta practice for ourselves. So having the alternation between self and benefactor or friend is extremely useful in metta.

Then we come to the neutral person, who is conceptually maybe the most interesting person in the metta practice, from the point of view of what you could call Dharma theory. This is such an interesting point, because we find that we can care a lot about someone that we don't really know. This really opens the doors of possibility much wider than we would normally think from our upbringing, because really the neutral person is like a representative of all the other people on the planet that we don't know. There are six billion people out there that we haven't met yet. Therefore, we don't have a reason to dislike them yet. And the neutral person is the representative of those people. When we find we can open to them, the possibility is there to open to anyone else that we meet.

This is where the concept of the brahmaviharas being boundless practices comes in. They are boundless in the range of beings to whom they can be extended. It's said that loving-kindness is like a gentle rain that falls everywhere without distinction, because of this boundless quality. They're also boundless in another way: the mind that can open to loving-kindness for all beings itself becomes immeasurable. It becomes limitless. So both the range of beings to whom we can extend it and the breadth or expansiveness of the mind of loving-kindness are both boundless or immeasurable.

The Buddha pointed to this universal quality of loving-kindness in a quote that kind of blows my mind, if it's true. I'll just read it and you can contemplate. The Buddha said that given all the rounds of birth and death and rebirth that all of us have gone through, it is not easy to find a single being in this world who has not at some time or other been your mother or your father or your sister or your brother or your daughter or your son.

What if that was true? I'll just invite you, as your eyes are open and you're looking around the room, to imagine if that was true for us—if we had all had that intimate a connection at some time in the past. How would that feel? It might depend how you feel about your family of origin. Nonetheless, we may all be a lot more closely connected than we sometimes think we are. This kind of reflection really can open our hearts to the wideness of life.

The Buddha said this also in the Karaniyametta Sutta: "Just as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings."

I heard a really nice story about this over the summer. It is easy to look around the world, focus on all the things that are going wrong, and lose track of the fact that there are a lot of things going right. For me, one of the most heartening things in our world today is the young people. I meet people in their teens and twenties who are so cool—so grown up and mature and poised and self-confident in a way that I never was at that age. I think it comes from having had some good parenting along the way, as well as innate good qualities. And young people coming into the Dharma world with that kind of background really have the opportunity to do a great deal of good service in this world. A lot of the younger generation are very turned on to environmental concerns, very committed to positive change in the world, and doing it all with a kind of spiritual bent. So I feel very happy about the state of the young generation right now.

One of the people who has made me appreciate this is the daughter of Jack Kornfield, another Vipassana teacher in our circle who lives in California. Her name is Caroline. She had just graduated from UC Berkeley and was applying to law schools, thinking that she wanted to do human rights activism work. Caroline was driving back from Berkeley into Marin with a friend of hers, a girlfriend about her age. They were driving down this six-lane road that leads by the ferry in Larkspur, if you happen to know that area, on their way out to Woodacre, where Spirit Rock is. They noticed that traffic was slowing down—and there's usually not a jam there at that time of day. So they just inched along, got up to the place where the traffic was stopped, and then they saw what the problem was.

There was a mother duck who was trying to cross the three lanes of their road to get to the bay on the other side. And behind this mother duck were about eight little ducklings. The mother had gotten across the lanes of traffic and hopped up on the median, but the little ducks were having a hard time getting across because the traffic kept holding them up, and having a hard time hopping up onto the median because it was tall for their little bodies.

Caroline and her friend got there. She stopped the car in the middle of three lanes of traffic. Her friend got out and held the other lanes back so that the ducks could cross. And the ones who couldn't get up on the median—Caroline and her friend went and helped them up. They got all the ducks, the mother and the six little ones, onto the median, and then the mother hopped down on the other side because the bay was in that direction. So they had to go over to the other side and stop those cars there.

So the mother and the ducklings could cross, and then they helped the ducklings up onto the curb on the other side. Meanwhile, the traffic was backing up because it had now come to a complete standstill. People in the back were honking—you know, "Why did you stop? Get going, get going!" Obviously some aversion going on there. But the people who drove up and saw what they were doing got out of their cars and started applauding and cheering for them. They got all the ducks over to the other side, started off again, and everybody left happily.

This is how, with a boundless heart, we cherish all living beings. That was a nice story.

As we start to open with the eyes of loving-kindness to other beings, we become really aware that the same phrases work for everybody. When you hit upon a set of phrases about safety and happiness and health and ease—what beings don't want those qualities? We really see how much alike we are. We see how connected we are. In some ways, we all have the same heart. We have different permutations of patterns, different combinations of emotions, but basically we all have the same range of feelings and we all have the same deep wish, the same deep aspirations—to be safe and happy and healthy and to live with ease.

The Brahma Viharas are a really direct way to connect ourselves with all of life. In this way, they provide a means for moving out of a place of isolation or loneliness that a very individualistic culture tends to engender in us. And this also forms the basis for our practice of sīla, as Sally talked about—this practice of conduct that seeks not to harm others.

I sometimes wonder how far this practice of non-harming can be extended. I was very interested to read an interview that the Dalai Lama had with Oprah Winfrey, published in her magazine *O* a couple of years ago. I really appreciate that Oprah has this rare talent of bringing teachings about well-being and health and spirituality to such a wide audience. It's hard to introduce wide audiences to this material, but she's somebody who has that talent and capability.

This is a report from somebody who was at the interview she held with the Dalai Lama. The first question Oprah asked was, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

The Dalai Lama replied, "Small incidents, like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said. "An insect? Hmm, okay."

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bedbugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly, "but major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent and looked out the window. There was awe in her voice when she finally continued. "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a good life. That's a great life, to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama said, "service to Buddhism, service to humanity—I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators, even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind, I don't lag too far behind."

I think that kind of blameless life really helps to support that kind of meditative depth. Just seeing the degree of refinement that is possible for us, I find really inspiring.

This quality of care for other beings that is touched through the practice of the Brahma Viharas—particularly through mettā and compassion—can then come back into our practice as a motivation for why we're doing what we're doing. This is the quality we've talked about a number of times called bodhicitta: the aspiration that we

may develop our practice to the fullest extent possible so that we can help others come to the end of suffering as a way to benefit them. This quality is sometimes translated as the awakening mind.

The Dalai Lama said that he used to be very impressed by the concept of emptiness. I'll read you the quotation: "Twenty years ago, I used to contemplate emptiness. I was very impressed by the theory of emptiness, and it really inspired me to seek the cessation of suffering."

So notice the connection here between basically emptiness and the Third Noble Truth. They have a very close relationship.

The Dalai Lama continued: "But compared to emptiness, nowadays I'm even more impressed and moved by my understanding of the awakening mind—by the compassion and tolerance that come with the awakening mind. The union of compassion and emptiness is something quite unique, but you can bring about an inner experience of it if you make the effort."

Here he's pointing to the concept that the root of bodhicitta, sometimes called absolute bodhicitta, is the direct experience of this union of compassion and emptiness. Once we see it in ourselves, we can see that nature in everyone.

This is again from Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche: "There is also an inner wound called Tathagatagarbha or Buddha nature. This is like a heart that has been sliced and bruised with wisdom and compassion. When the external wound and the internal wound begin to meet and communicate, then we begin to realize that our whole being is made out of one complete sore spot altogether. This is called Bodhisattva fever. That vulnerability is compassion. We really have no way to defend ourselves anymore."

This is the kind of opening that comes from the neutral person and the way that the neutral person connects us to all sentient beings, to all of life.

The next person in the progression is the difficult person. The difficult person often brings for us strong reactions, typically of fear or anger. This is very common.

I was doing a six-week period of metta retreat here at IMS one year, and my difficult person happened to be on the retreat also. So I would be saying my phrases—may all beings be safe, may they be happy—feeling the stirrings of metta, and then my difficult person would walk by. I'd start running over all the events of the past year that had caused the difficulties between us. Then I'd start spinning out: How could they have done that? Why didn't they do this? My anger level would just start rising and rising. I couldn't gather it in. I was spinning out for half an hour. I had been fairly concentrated

up to that point, but eventually it would wear itself out, and I'd come back to the metta phrases. Then a few hours later, they'd walk by again, and the whole thing would happen again.

So I thought, I need to do something different here. I'd heard about this concept of doing metta for the difficult person, but frankly, I thought it was a little hokey. I don't want to have to pretend I like this person, I thought. It seemed like it was going against the grain. But I was really running out of options, so in my desperation, I decided to try it.

I found something really interesting. The quality that we often talk of as anger—the Pali or Sanskrit term—is usually better translated by the words "ill will." And what this means, of course, is the opposite of goodwill. In metta, we're sending out goodwill, which is a wish: may you be happy. With ill will, when we look at it, our wish is: may you be unhappy. That's what ill will means.

So I looked at this quality of ill will, and I saw that within my anger was this wish that the other person suffer. Now, ill will is the far enemy of loving-kindness. The far enemy of compassion is cruelty. The difference between ill will and cruelty is that with ill will, we would like the other person to suffer, and with cruelty, we enjoy it when the other person is suffering.

I could sort of hang with the idea of being an angry person, but I could not hang with the idea of being a cruel person. When I thought of myself potentially being cruel and enjoying someone else's suffering, something brought me up short. I couldn't live with that. And I saw how close ill will was to cruelty.

That's really what gave me the inspiration to see if I could generate some goodwill for my difficult person. I made a sincere effort, and I found I could bring a wish that that person be happy. When I could wish my difficult person happiness, it ended the ill will. Goodwill and ill will can't coexist. In ending the ill will, the anger went away.

It was interesting. I didn't have to like that person. I didn't have to want to spend time with them.

I didn't have to condone the things they'd done. All I had to do was shift my ill will to goodwill, and it took the anger out. It was very interesting learning for me.

The second of the Brahmaviharas is compassion. We talked quite a lot about this through the guided meditations, and Sharda did a whole talk on it, so I'm not going to go further into compassion tonight. I'll skip to the third Brahmavihara of appreciative joy, or mudita.

Metta has a lot of potential for happiness—for bringing happiness into our own hearts and then sharing it. Mudita, I feel, has even more potential for happiness. It is a practice that is founded on the quality of happiness, so it's very upbeat. The meaning is that we respond with joy to someone else's joy.

Just as a simple example, I got a phone call a while ago from a friend I hadn't heard from for a while. I picked up the phone, said hello—I was happy to hear from this person—and I said to her, "How are you?" And very enthusiastically came this response: "I'm wonderful." Just hearing her say that without any hesitation, so directly, touched something in me, and without even thinking, I said, "I am too." Her energy just brought out that same kind of energy from me. And that's the immediate response of mudita.

So it's like this double hit of happiness. There's the other person's and then there's yours—like the double latte. It's just twice as good.

As Sally talked about in her talk on transcendent dependent arising, this quality of joy is really an integral part of the path. Not only does the Buddha say it, but I found a very intriguing comment from a Theravadan monk who lives in Sri Lanka and is becoming a very skilled translator and commentator on the Buddha's teachings. His name is Venerable Analayo. He's written a very impressive commentary—a book-length commentary on the Satipatthana Sutta called *Satipatthana*, highly recommended. In that book, Venerable Analayo says this: "The entire scheme of the gradual training can be envisaged as a progressive refinement of joy." This is really what Sharda was pointing to last night in the development of sukha, the ripening of sukha—whether it begins from dukkha or from sukha, it ripens in that direction of inner pleasure and happiness.

This term mudita is sometimes translated as sympathetic joy. I want to point this out because there's a little bit of a split in our tradition on the appropriate translation. Sympathetic joy means that in order for me to feel it, I have to resonate with you. In some texts, the message is put out that we can only feel this quality of mudita for other people—we can't feel it for ourselves because there has to be joy out there that I resonate with in sympathy. That lineage within our tradition tends to call it sympathetic joy, and it's said that you can't practice mudita for yourself. I think because they believe it's too self-centered.

But the Buddha never said that we should exclude ourselves from the immeasurable quality of mudita. He never said it was for all beings but you. He said it was for all beings, just like the other Brahmaviharas. I interpret it in that way, and I feel it's very helpful to include oneself in the practice of mudita. And so I like to translate it, as someone else suggested, as appreciative joy. We appreciate the joy that we find in others. We appreciate the joy that we find in ourselves.

As we practice the quality of mudita toward ourselves, the flavor that it evokes, for me, is that of gratitude. When we appreciate our own blessings, that flavor is gratitude.

I want to talk a little bit about this state of mind. It's really a beautiful state because when we appreciate what we have, it cuts through greed for more. We don't feel we need more because we appreciate where we are. It also cuts through aversion, because we're looking at what's wholesome in our life—we're not so aware of what's lacking or what's difficult. So when gratitude is present, greed and aversion are both prevented from arising.

A number of scientific studies recently have focused on this quality. I think in Western terms, it's one of the Brahmavihara faculties that Westerners can relate to. There could be great studies on metta, on compassion, on other forms of appreciative joy, but gratitude is a little more in our culture, so I think it's been a natural one to study. These studies have shown that gratitude, when practiced regularly, leads to feelings of greater joy, optimism, happiness, a sense of well-being that includes the body as well as the mind. People report fewer physical complaints when they've been practicing gratitude.

But even gratitude, though it's recognized in our culture once a year on Thanksgiving, doesn't come that easily.

It's not that deeply embedded for us as a practice, as a heart practice.

If we want to get a sense of our culture's attitude on this, we turn to The Simpsons. They're really a great bellwether of American values. For those of you who have the good fortune to be from Europe or New Zealand or Australia, The Simpsons is this rather cynical cartoon show that has taken the country by storm. It's very, very popular, reflecting something of the malaise of modern life.

Bart Simpson, the mischievous young kid, was asked to say grace at his dinner table one night, and this was his grace: "Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing." This reflects something of the attitude toward gratitude in this culture.

So it's sometimes helpful to step outside the culture and see how gratitude is practiced in other places. Many people have talked about being touched by the gratitude they encounter in Asia. I experienced this when I went to Burma a couple of years ago. One of my students loves to practice generosity—she's very keen on supporting serious practitioners—so she gave me a few hundred dollars to offer to the monastery where I would be living for six weeks.

When I arrived at the monastery, I thought I would like to use the money to sponsor some lunches for everyone living there. This was an intensive practice monastery with 750 people in residence at that time: about 450 monks, 150 nuns, and other laypeople living and practicing.

I went to the steward, the layperson who manages the monastery's finances, and said, "Someone gave me a gift I'd like to make to the monastery. I'd like to sponsor some lunches, if possible." I told him I had a few hundred dollars.

He said, "Oh, I'm very sorry, but all the lunches are spoken for for the next three months."

Feeding 750 people—all those meals were already sponsored for the next ninety days. Burma is one of the poorest countries in Asia. It used to be one of the wealthiest; unfortunately, today it's one of the poorest. And yet people there, almost entirely local people, had already sponsored lunches for the next ninety days.

Every day I would go down to lunch, and there would be a whiteboard with the name of the donor and a message. It was that kind of practice that inspired our meal dana here and the beautiful messages of support that we read every day. There, this process of giving is so integral a part of the culture. People bring a lot of joy to it, and it's simply a natural, ongoing part of their lives.

When we turn our minds to gratitude, all of us here have so many things to be grateful for. Largely, it's just a matter of remembering that this is the case.

A friend of ours had been a monk in Thailand for a number of years, and when he came out of the robes into lay life, he didn't feel in any hurry to leave the country. He found a job in a refugee camp on the border with Cambodia—an administrative job running part of a training program. Cambodian people who had been persecuted under the Khmer Rouge were leaving that country and finding safe haven in Thailand. There they went through a program that would educate them and prepare them for being relocated to the West.

Many of these people were from the hill tribes of Cambodia and had lived very, very simple lives. They were being prepared to move to California—Fresno, California—where they had to learn to use things like toasters and washing machines, read bus timetables, and handle coins, none of which had been part of their lives.

As part of the training, my friend asked his class, "What are the most important things in a human life?" This is a great reflection. I love to ask myself that question from time to time.

One teenage girl from the hill tribe replied, "The most important things in a human life are fire, rice, and water."

When you think about this answer, those would be the most important things in our lives too—if we didn't have them and take them for granted.

I like to reflect on this. Tonight we're inside on this really cold and windy evening, and we're warm. We're dry. We've been well-fed. These are some of the advantages we enjoy that not all beings in this world enjoy, not all human beings enjoy. Even just thinking outside these four walls—what are the birds doing tonight? And the chipmunks? And the deer, who may be quite aware that it's hunting season. What are they doing tonight?

We're really quite lucky in so many ways.

Moreover, we have another truly remarkable advantage that Tibetans call a precious human birth. In addition to having the requisites of life—which in the Buddhist system are considered to be food, clothing, shelter, and medicine—I think we all have some reasonable access to health care. And we all have an opportunity to make this life truly meaningful.

We have been born as human beings with our minds and bodies working reasonably well. We are alive at a time when a Buddha has appeared in our historical era. We're living in a place and a time where the Dharma is flourishing to a certain extent, where there are practitioners who are following the teachings, where we ourselves have the time and the interest to pursue the teachings, where we've heard and understood the Dharma, and we have the requisites of life to pursue them.

How many people on this earth have all those combinations of qualities in their life right now? Not so many.

The ability to have recognized an authentic path to liberation and to have the opportunity to walk it—it really is a tremendous blessing.

One of the things that arises when I reflect on gratitude is that I'm most grateful for the existence of the path. Because I reflect back to my life before I knew there was such a thing as a path, and I think about the level of what I can only describe as darkness and confusion in my mind. Happiness seemed random. Suffering seemed random. I didn't know any way to stabilize my mind in peace or contentment.

How would we face death without this practice? How would we face aging? Just to know that you are not the body is amazing. How few people in the world have a sense of that? And so how scary it must be to meet death when we don't have a sense of anything else.

On one retreat, in order to practice gratitude, I made a list of all the things in my life I felt grateful for. At the start of every day, I would read that list. I found it just set my mind in a really positive direction. Whatever happened in the rest of the day, I had made that beginning with a truly optimistic attitude.

The last of the brahmavihāras is the quality of equanimity, which Sarada also spoke about. I don't want to say a lot about it. I just want to make one small pointing.

I've often wondered how the Buddha stayed equanimous in the face of all the suffering that he saw. Conditions were very brutal in ways in India in his day. There was a lot of war between neighboring kingdoms, and as you probably know, combat at that time was hand-to-hand—pretty direct and pretty bloody. There are accounts of monks walking across battlefields strewn with dead and bloodied bodies. The Buddha would have been exposed to all of that and seen all of that. How did he manage to stay equanimous in the middle of that kind of brutality?

Or how does the Dalai Lama stay balanced when he's responsible for Tibetan culture, when he may be all that stands between the present moment and the genocide, the termination of Tibetan culture?

I think it's because enlightened beings know a secret that we haven't fully integrated, even if we've realized it. They know that within this mind and body process, there is no abiding center to whom all of this is happening. When we see clearly, there are only sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, thoughts, and emotions. There is nothing else. There's no core that's experiencing the impact of all this.

In the Visuddhimagga, there's a beautiful line that expresses this. It says: "There is suffering, but there is no one who suffers. Empty phenomena roll on. This view alone is right and true."

Summed up another way: Jack Kornfield was visiting Sri Lanka when he was a monk. There was a very well-practiced patriarch in the country whom he went to visit. He asked the patriarch the reason for his happiness—a very jolly, smiling and laughing man. And this patriarch replied, "No self, no problem."

It's the same pointing. This really is the union of wisdom and loving-kindness. The union of emptiness and caring. And this is essentially what solves the problem of existence for us as we get grounded in that way of looking.

I'll close with the end of Oprah's interview with the Dalai Lama. Oprah said to him, "In my magazine, I do a column called 'What I Know For Sure.' What do you know for sure? The one thing about which you have no doubt."

The Dalai Lama did not hesitate. "Compassion is the best source of happiness. For a happy life and a happy world, there is no doubt."

Let's just sit for a moment together.

This is the formulation of the brahmavihāras in the Tibetan tradition—four wishes that are called the Four Immeasurables:

May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue.

May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue.

May all beings remain unseparated from the sacred happiness, which is free from sorrow.

May all beings come to rest in the great equanimity beyond attachment to those near and far.

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May all beings come to rest in the great equanimity beyond attachment to those near and far.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 49

Eight Worldly Conditions

Sally Armstrong · 58 min

> *Drawing from observations made during a trip to Italy—where walled cities, competitive towers, and ornate Medici palaces revealed the human tendencies toward greed and fear—Sally Armstrong illuminates the Buddha's teaching on the aṭṭha lokadhammā (eight worldly conditions). These four pairs—gain and loss, fame and disrepute, praise and blame, pleasure and pain—perpetually spin through our lives, and our suffering arises from welcoming the pleasant while rebelling against the unpleasant.*
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> *Through teachings from Ajahn Chah and the Lokavipatti Sutta (AN 8.6), Armstrong shows how we become "worldlings" lost in these conditions when we identify with them, building our sense of self around external circumstances. She contrasts the Medicis' frantic accumulation with St. Francis of Assisi's simplicity, noting whose influence endures. The talk explores how even meditators evaluate their practice through the lens of success and failure, and how we cling to praise while dwelling on criticism.*
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> *The path forward lies not in escaping these conditions—they will always be with us—but in meeting them with mindfulness and wisdom. Through recognizing their impermanent, conditioned nature and refusing to identify with them as "me" or "mine," we can experience what Ajahn Chah calls having them be "of equal value." This equanimity transforms worldly dhamma into the path itself, revealing that liberation lies not elsewhere but right here in how we relate to our moment-to-moment experience.*

I think Guy mentioned in a talk a little while ago about a trip we took to Italy a few years ago where he and Carol taught a retreat, and then afterwards we all took a bit of a vacation in Tuscany and also spent some time in Florence. It was my first visit to Italy, and it's as beautiful as they tell you it is. It's so classically Italian, I guess you would say—just beautiful fields of sunflowers and lavender and these old towns, and of course all the art that you can see there.

One of the predominant features of the area we were in were these walled villages set on top of hills. If you stood in a valley and looked around, you would see on many of the surrounding hills where the settlements were, and they were nearly always walled villages. Then in walking through the streets of Florence, there were these huge old stone palaces, but nearly all of them had these enormous wooden doors with huge bolts and hinges. It really looked like massive fortifications.

Being in a place with such history, it really evokes very clearly the condition of the human mind and also the features that have shaped the landscape, because so much of the landscape is built by human beings there. In Italy, and I presume in a lot of the old cities in Europe, the influence of humans on the landscape has actually in some ways improved it. Here we seem to go in the opposite direction; it doesn't seem much of an improvement a lot of the time. But there, it's actually quite beautiful. And it was really clear to me that the landscape was representing something about the arc of human history and the human condition.

Even in the little town where we did the retreat, which was quite out in the country where this monastery or convent was, there were some new buildings nearby, new houses, and even those new houses all had burglar alarm systems and wired security. We live in Woodacre—we don't even lock our doors or our cars. To see this out in the countryside in Italy, I was just curious about what was going on in the psyche there. And you could kind of see it represented in the architecture, really this movement of greed and fear throughout the landscape, if you looked at it in this way.

One of the places we went to that I remember was San Gimignano. It's quite a famous place because the landscape of the little town is dominated by these towers that were built—very tall, thin towers. I think there are fourteen or fifteen of them, quite high. You look at them and you wonder, what is the purpose of these towers? They're not really big enough to live in, and they're all together. It's not like they're needed for lookouts because they're all within this walled town. When you look a little bit more closely, you find out there was a competition as to who could build the tallest tower, and that's the reason they're there. So within the walled cities built out of fear, the towers are built out of greed—to be the person who builds the tallest tower. It was just fascinating to see this landscape reflecting the state of the mind and heart of the people who were living there.

Another thing that struck me as we were walking through the various landscapes was that one part of a trail we were on was actually part of an old pilgrimage trail, probably a thousand years old, that wound all through that southern part of Europe. There was a map depicting how people would travel along this and walk. Obviously they'd be walking for hundreds and hundreds of miles. Many people along the way had built way stations for the pilgrims. But a way station, which was done out of a lot of care and offering and generosity, was usually just a simple stone room with hay on the ground. That's where they would sleep as they performed their pilgrimage. The faith was so strong that they endured all of these hardships to travel in this way to the place where they were going to pay homage.

Looking at that and seeing the reality for those people and what they were willing to do—these days we complain about cross-country air travel where we're five hours sitting in a seat and we're warm and dry and fed a minimal amount of food, if anything at all. Just contrasting what people did out of faith and how much we complain about our situation if we're in economy class at the back of the plane. It's like terrible.

When we were in Florence, one of the things you really notice is the presence of this clan called the Medicis. They really dominated the politics of the city for so long and became very powerful and wealthy. They ruled the city—in those days they were like city-states, not like a city you'd know now. They were complete little independent units. The Medicis built a huge number of palaces and mausoleums and things throughout the city, so they're quite predominant as you go to the different sites.

When I read the history of the Medicis, there was a similar kind of thing coming through, where you saw they would go through these periods of expansion where they were really rulers of everything. They would build all this stuff and spend money left and right, and then something would change, and they would be outcasts. They would be thrown out of the city, penniless. And somehow—and this is over the span of hundreds of years—they would find their way back in and then rebuild their empire. There really was this sense of this movement, this cycle.

changing conditions that people underwent, but always a striving to be back in power and wealthy again.

They built one of the—at the time—the most expensive buildings ever built, the Capella Medici, lined in marble with many times life-size statues of the family placed around it. And you could really get the sense of how there was actually a fear of death, and they needed somehow to have this memorial to themselves so that they wouldn't be forgotten, so that they felt in life that there was something that was going to outlast them.

And then another church we went to, Santa Croce. Again, a lot of memorials around people, their tombstones. And I remember very clearly seeing some that were actually laid into the floor of the church, built out of stone—life-size replicas of the persons buried underneath. You can imagine the mind state of the person who commissioned this. It's like, "This is going to be permanent. Here I'll lie." But the thing is, after however many hundreds of years, these had almost worn smooth from all the people who had passed over them. And so all of these movements to try to hold on to some permanency, some place of "Here I am. I count. I matter"—it all gets worn away in time or with changing conditions.

The last place I'll talk about, because it was so amazing, was the Palazzo Pitti. It's this palace that's been turned into a museum, but in some ways it looks much like it must have when people lived there. You go through a sequence of rooms that are highly decorated, filled now with cabinets of all the stuff these people owned. I really felt it was like papañca made manifest—papañca on steroids. It was just stuff from all over the world, big and small, gold and ivory, intricate and large. It was overwhelming.

But finally you come into this big round room that was the reception chamber, where people came to speak to the Duke or whoever was in charge, to have an audience with him. Again, very fancy, but no furniture, because it was said that only the Duke sat—in the chair on the throne. Everyone else had to stand. And it was built in a trompe l'oeil style, with imagined staircases around it, really very elaborate. So in the midst of all this confusion and ostentation, right at the top of the ceiling there was a big fresco, and the words were written: "All fortune is illusory. It passes and does not last. Merit and virtue last and do not pass away."

Somehow there was a real disconnect between what was in this palace and this beautiful sentiment on the ceiling. I think they wanted to have their cake and eat it too. They wanted everything but also a semblance, I think, of virtue. But there's real truth in that saying, that fortune is illusory. As I reflected on this, you could just see how ephemeral were even all these things they owned, things they set so much store by—now museum pieces that tourists wander by. Yet for them, they were what they could hold on to.

The only church that we visited—and if you've been in Europe, you know what it's like: "Oh no, not another medieval church, or another Renaissance masterpiece. I've had enough already." But the one that really had the most impact, I think, on all of us was the Church of St. Francis of Assisi. It was just amazing to really feel his spirit in the buildings that he built, especially the place where he lived and spent a lot of his time practicing in retreat. You could feel the devotion people had for him.

One of the amazing things: down on the plains of Assisi, he had built his first original little church, a very simple structure—a third the size, a quarter of the size of this room—very simple stone. But St. Francis was such a threat to the Catholic Church because of his vows of poverty and simplicity. The church was very much into accumulating lands and building massive cathedrals, so he was really a danger to them. They had a very ambivalent relationship. But the way the church got around this was, after St. Francis died, they built this amazing cathedral around his little church. So you see this huge

cathedral on the plains of Assisi, and when you go inside, right in the middle is this little structure—that's the original church. It's like they had to co-opt St. Francis to make him safe again for them.

But again, looking at this contrast between the Medicis and what they held on to, and St. Francis with his vow of poverty—he gave everything up, he was such a man of the people, he helped everyone he could—who is having more influence today? Who do we respect? Who moves our heart? We can go through and see all these marvels that the Medicis created, but they're sterile. They're lifeless. They're just buildings. But St. Francis still moves people today.

And so again, this sense of what's really important for us. We get so entranced by the things of the world. We want to make a mark and think if it's there in marble or stone, that means something about us.

But it doesn't, really.

And what I saw as I reflected on these very apparent truths, the nature of the human condition, is this teaching that the Buddha gave on the eight worldly conditions, or eight worldly winds as they're often called. This is a set of four matching pairs: gain and loss, fame and disrepute, pain and pleasure, happiness and unhappiness. What the Buddha saw was how we all live our lives spinning around within these alternating pairs. And this is what you could see the Medicis were caught in—moments of great expansion and power and wealth. They had everything, and then they would lose everything, only to scramble their way back in. But of course, eventually, death alone will be an end to that accumulation, and they never quite had the wisdom to see that.

But even for us today, if we look at our lives, how much of the time we spend influenced by these changing conditions. How much we try to hold on to the positive ones and resist and judge and blame and are angry about the difficult ones. We get caught in this, and often can feel kind of trapped by this—that these are the polarities of our lives. This is what we live for and by, these changing conditions, trying to hold on to the pleasant ones and pushing away the unpleasant ones.

But if we're a dharma practitioner, we need to begin to look at these in a different way. This is what B. Alan Wallace says about them:

"It is easy when we meet with misfortune, poverty, loss of reputation or status in our job, or a calamity such as the loss of a loved one, to lose enthusiasm for dharma in the depths of our disillusionment. But instead of succumbing to despair in the face of adversity, we seek to cultivate that inner strength—which is really what patience is about—inner courage as ballast for the vessel of your life.

Related to this is a tendency to judge our dharma practice superficially on the basis of external circumstances. When life is treating us well, we feel that dharma is good. We might give it a half hour every day religiously and think that the job is done because the rest of our waking day is going well.

A dharma practitioner should view the pleasures of a good job, a healthy family situation, comfortable living circumstances, and a sound economy with suitable delight—as we would look at a very pleasant painting balanced upon a structure of matchsticks. This is happiness due to pleasant external stimuli, which by and large are beyond our control. A Buddhist response is not in any way to begrudge these mundane pleasures, but at the same time not to use them as a substitute for dharma practice. This is not so obvious during the good times, but it becomes very apparent—maybe a little too late—during the bad times."

So we need to be aware of how much these worldly winds affect us. Are we being entranced, captivated by the positive ones and laying claim to them in some way? Are we blaming ourselves or judging if we're experiencing more difficulty? Because they will always be present. And this is really the theme I want to talk about tonight. They're always with us. The question is, how do we relate to them? What do we do with them?

You only have to read a newspaper or look at what's out there in the media to see this vacillation for people who become famous. And it's so interesting how there's an addiction towards being famous at the moment, yet it brings with it such penalties. For me, the biggest image of this is when Bill Clinton was president. There he was, leader of the free world, in some ways said to be the most powerful man on the planet. All of these accolades and the amazing things that he did. And then to have the most intimate, embarrassing details of his sexual liaisons broadcast to all the world. How could you hold that in your mind—to be president and then have this going on? I really don't know how he survived that. But you see how they just go hand in hand. If there's one, there's bound to be the other.

So we need to bring these into our awareness, to see that they are always with us, but we have a choice of how we respond to them. We have a choice of how we relate to them.

Ajahn Chah talks a lot about them in his little booklet, *A Taste of Freedom*. The Thai forest meditation master says:

"These activities of happiness, unhappiness, and so on are constantly arising because they are characteristics of the world. The Buddha was enlightened in the world. He contemplated the world. If he hadn't contemplated the world, if he hadn't seen the world,

he couldn't have risen above it. The Buddha's enlightenment was simply enlightenment of this very world. The world was still there. Gain and loss, praise and criticism, fame and disrepute, happiness and unhappiness were still there. If there weren't these things there, there would be nothing to become enlightened to. What he knew was just the world, that which surrounds the hearts of people. If people follow these things, seeking praise and fame, gain and happiness, and trying to avoid their opposites, they sink under the weight of the world."

I like that. They sink under the weight of the world.

Gain and loss, praise and criticism, fame and disrepute, happiness and unhappiness —this is the world. The person who is lost in the world has no path of escape. The world overwhelms him. This world follows the law of Dhamma, so we call it worldly Dhamma. He who lives within the worldly Dhamma is called a worldly being. He lives surrounded by confusions.

Therefore, the Buddha taught us to develop the path. We can divide it up into morality, concentration, and wisdom—three baskets of the Eightfold Path. Develop them to completion. This is a path of practice which destroys the world. And by that he means this world we get entranced by with conditions.

Where is this world? It is just in the minds of beings infatuated with it. The action of clinging to praise, gain, fame, happiness and unhappiness is called world. When it is there in the mind, then the world arises. The worldly being is born. The world is born of desire. Desire is the birthplace of all worlds. To put an end to desire is to put an end to this world—that world of confusion.

You can really get a sense from that how these forces, if we're not aware of them, can control us, can oppress us, can be the lens through which we look at our experience. We can just become lost in that. Getting the positive ones, pushing away the difficult ones—that's the only reason some people live their lives.

The first of these pairs is gain and loss. You only have to look at the stock market to see this writ large. From the early nineties there was this dot-com boom, and what comes along with a dot-com bust. Those stories of a three hundred dollar stock that became worth thirty cents, people who made millions on paper and a few days later it was worthless. It was such a clear seeing of how much investment people had, how much identity they had wrapped up in these gains.

Unfortunately, we're seeing the same thing around the housing market, where people who really can't afford these losses are being severely impacted. It's a tragedy going on throughout the nation. Apparently Worcester County, not far from here, is one of the largest areas of mortgage defaulting, for some unfortunate reason.

But if we put all our hope and faith in getting stuff, it's just inevitable that we're going to lose stuff. And if that's what's making us happy, we're going to be unhappy.

I saw this cartoon in our local paper around Christmas time. It was a girl in front of all the open presents under the tree, and she said, "I feel so empty. There's nothing left to want." It's like we want to want, because that's the only way we know how to be happy. And when that wanting is over for whatever reason, we don't have anything secure to replace it with.

The nineties was the decade of greed, where it really reached heights of these almost obscene amounts of money people made. Actually, it's happening again. It's not so much in the news, but recently I read just another little blip in the New York Times about how much money people were making. A lot of those people also work insanely hard for that money—not all, but a lot. And one guy said there came this moment where he stopped and looked around and said, "Am I really working this hard so I can buy a more expensive watch?" Because that's what it comes down to. Does my watch have diamonds on it? And if I work hard enough, I can get the next level of watch. It just becomes a ridiculous and ongoing cycle.

It becomes all about maintaining a lifestyle where it's not about what actually makes me happy. Once you get to a certain level, all you're concerned about is that you have the things that go with that lifestyle. And if someone else has more, then that's what you want too.

I mentioned the other day this tradition of "guru cartoons" that often capture a little bit of the human psyche in this movement of desire. This one is from Hägar the Horrible—you know, that little chubby Viking guy who's always going around supposedly marauding and raiding. In this one, he's on his own, climbing a very steep mountaintop, the classic quest, laboring away.

And Hagar says to him, "Oh, great sage, please teach me the secret of happiness."

And in the third frame, the sage says, "Simplicity, self-restraint, and renunciation—the secret of happiness."

Fourth frame: Hagar pausing and saying, "Is there anyone else up here I can talk to?"

We don't like to hear this message—that this is the answer for this duality of gain and loss, that actually giving up and giving away is the source of happiness. We're convinced that holding on is the way to go. It's the message society gives us.

That's why I think it's really helpful to travel abroad, especially in Asia, and get a sense of different conditions. Get a sense of how people live, and also to see how happy they often are in the midst of what we would consider nothing. There can be a real joy and generosity in people living in very difficult situations. It's just really balancing. We can get a little distorted living here in the West. We're really living in a way of luxury that hasn't been equaled before—the prevalence of material possessions that people have in this country and in most Western countries. So to really question the necessity of that by looking a little broader.

For us as practitioners, we begin to see that it's not about the new goodies or what's under the tree at Christmastime. How many of you are looking forward to going Christmas shopping? It's not that fun. Yet there's some obsession about needing to get and to give at this time of Christmas. And how quickly forgotten are all those things we put so much energy into. So we learn that actually renunciation and simplicity are far greater sources of happiness.

There's this great sutta in the Udana. The story is of a king who gives up his throne quite willingly and becomes a monk and goes to meditate, as they do in those days, under the root of a tree out in the forest. And he's heard by the other monks who pass him by as he's meditating. They hear him muttering, "Oh, what bliss! What bliss! What bliss!"

The monks hear this and they're a little concerned. What they think is, "Oh, he's remembering his days as a king and all the luxury he had then—the food and the women and the nice clothes. He's just sitting there and he's not meditating. He's basically having fantasies about his previous life."

So what do they do? They go off and tell the Buddha. If, as a yogi, you were ever worried about whether you should mention something to the teachers, don't worry—there's a lot of precedent for this in the suttas. There are always these stories of monks seeing such and such and going to tell the Buddha, like tattletaling. And the Buddha usually responds.

So in this case, he calls this ex-king, this bhikkhu, to him and says, "Oh bhikkhu, I've heard this story. People have said this is what you say. Is this true?"

And he says, "Yes, it is true. It's what I say."

And the Buddha says, "Well, what are you thinking of when you say that?"

And he says, "When I was the king, I had everything I could need—food and possessions, luxury—but I lived in a walled city surrounded by guards, and I was always in fear of my life, threatened by enemies, worried about holding on to the throne and looking to get more and more and more. I lived in a constant state of fear and anxiety. Now that I've given everything away, I'm happier and freer than I could have ever imagined. And that is why I say, 'What bliss! What bliss!'"

It's a great story. In giving away, we actually get much more than we could ever hold on to through all our imaginings.

The next of these pairs is that of fame and disrepute, sometimes translated as success and failure, or status and disgrace. I actually saw, cruising around the web yesterday, that you can get insurance against ill fame and disrepute. So this is the way some people deal with this. It's like, don't worry about what you do—get insurance and then you're covered.

But there's nothing much we can do to guard against this. Conditions change and we get blamed for things. Whatever we were doing that was working doesn't work anymore. A friend of mine, who was a very successful investor, had a great company and was investing as a business.

And when the stock market went through all the readjustments that it's done these past years, her company and her investments got into a lot of problems. She lost a lot of money, and it was a real threat to her well-being and her sense of herself. She really had to use her practice to find some balance in that because it was such a source of identity for her.

Another friend who's a lawyer says that all law firms offer is material gain and status. That's what they promise you. All you have to do is sell your soul to get that. And that's what a lot of people do—to have that sense of the name on the door or the corner office. They'll do anything to get that.

But if your priorities are a little different, if you know that that's not really going to bring happiness, it can just seem crazy to look at from the outside—what people will do for fame. There is such an obsession with being famous these days, and I really don't understand it. People will do anything to be famous. Is anyone else waiting for the end of the reality show phase? I mean, what people will do to get on television these days is really very bizarre—show themselves off in the worst of lights, their most intimate mo-

ments revealed, shown to be greedy and divisive and jealous and bitter. And yet they're famous. Everything's okay because they're on Survivor or whatever it might be. It really doesn't make sense to me.

Also, the more famous one gets—and it's interesting how people crave fame—they'll do anything. When they're a B-list actor, it's like any news is good news. There's no such thing as bad publicity. But when you get to a certain level of fame, then it's, "Oh no, my privacy! Don't follow me." And you can't control it. Once that beast is unleashed and you reach a certain amount of fame, people get obsessed with you. It's really ridiculous how much people want to know about someone just because they're famous. Are they really that much more interesting? I don't think so. In fact, sometimes a little more vapid or inane. But people pore over the minutiae of these poor people's lives. And of course, eventually something embarrassing from their past or present is going to come up. It's inevitable. Or they'll just get so angry and frustrated with the hounding that they'll burst out in anger. It's what happens with people. And what they so wanted—to be famous—becomes one of their main sources of suffering.

Another huge example for me is Al Gore. As he introduces himself, "I was going to be your president," or "the once and future president." To be so close—to really have it, in essence, but to have it taken away from you—and to go from that to almost nothing. I'm sure he was very depressed for a long time after that. But then what's interesting to see is how he's reinvented himself as this almost savior of the world with his teaching on global warming. He is really making a huge difference now. If he'd been president, I don't know if he could have been so influential. He might have saved us all from a lot of grief, but in this area of global warming, he's doing amazing things.

And so this vacillation is just there. The question is, what do we do about it? As meditators, we can really see how we want to evaluate our practice. Was this retreat successful? Did I get what I wanted out of it? And I don't know about you, but for me, at the end of a retreat there's that thought of how am I going to present to the other? We've spent all these weeks divesting of a sense of self and being quite happy being a silent nobody. And yet when it comes up, that question—"How was your retreat?"—we have to have a good answer, don't we? "Oh, it was this and that, and I learned this and that." It's so hard to evaluate.

Please don't try. It's almost impossible in the middle or even close to the end—or even any time, actually—to really evaluate in terms of success or failure what a retreat has been. It's too mysterious. It's much more mysterious than that.

And even when the retreat ends, it's so hard to evaluate. We will only know as time unfolds and we see how we meet our experience as we go back into the world, when we're in relationship and connecting with other people, with our work and families. That's really the only way to tell, and it mightn't be very obvious or clear. So not to have some big judgment about success or failure.

So many people have said already, "It wasn't what I thought it was going to be." And yet we still hold on to these expectations of what it should be, of how it should measure up. I always say, even if I go into a retreat knowing to have no expectations, it's still always different. To really open to that—that we can't control this, that it's not helpful to judge.

The third of the pairs is praise and blame, or praise and criticism. Now this is one that gets many of us: the judging, the elation and the pain—the elation from being praised and the pain from being judged or criticized. We see how much we fear or value the opinions of others, that we really only find our identity through that lens. We place a lot of emphasis on how others see us, how we're held in their view, and that can be really paralyzing.

You can see how we can often be given compliments or praise and kind of dismiss it. "Oh, that's okay. That wasn't anything. I didn't try too hard. Don't worry about that." But someone says one negative thing to us and it goes around and around, and that's what we identify with. It's really interesting to see that.

I actually read some research on why this is so, why we tend to remember the negative things while the positive things we kind of fluff off. It was interesting—who knows if it's true—but this is what some research has found. Remembering the negative things, and in some ways you could say the difficult things, is one way we survived. The analogy they gave was that we remembered which were the poisonous berries, and so we didn't eat them. That's how you and I and our genetic pool are all still here—that remembering of what was bitter, of what killed someone else, that what was bad or wrong actually was helpful to us. So they really are thinking that's part of this psychology of why those difficult things that people say to us stick so much more than the compliments.

I really see this in this role as a teacher. It's not something I ever set out to do or had an agenda about—actually almost the opposite. But anytime you sit in front of a bunch of people and start saying stuff, you're going to get this push and pull of one person coming in saying, "I loved what you said," and the next person about the exact same thing saying, "I really have to give you some feedback about what you said last night." And it can be the exact same thing. How many times do people come and say, "Do you

mind if I give you some feedback?" It's like, "Well, actually..." But the opposite reactions about the same things. I'm sure you've had that experience. The old thing: you can't please everyone.

A yogi I was working with on another retreat came in and reported a really deep insight she had. She said she had a really difficult interaction with someone in her yogi job. And I mean, you know, really difficult—you know how it is. Just a little look or a glance can be a really difficult interaction in a yogi job. But she really worked with it. She said she saw it wasn't personal, that other person—she doesn't know what was going on for them. They might have been unhappy in some way already or had some trigger about what happened. So she said, "I really let it go. I was very pleased with myself for just not taking that on, not buying into it—they hate me, or I'm a bad person, or I did something wrong." She just really could let it go.

But then she said the kicker was later on someone gave her some praise in her yogi job. And she went, "Oh, thank you." But then the thought came—and who knows how much of this was just internal—"this too."

If you're going to let go of something difficult that someone said, you can't then with the same hand hold on to the praise. She had to gulp and swallow and let it go—not to dismiss it, but not to say, "Yes, that's me, the good yogi. I did this thing." And so it goes both ways. The teaching is really about not getting identified with either of them.

We can really get lost in blaming the other. If we find that we're being criticized, our instinctive reaction is to turn it around and push that away. And in that, there's still an identification. It's interesting, actually—someone else, when I was teaching this in a class, talked about how they would use praise to get people to like them. So working with these worldly conditions isn't all about just how they're affecting me. We can really see how we use them in our evaluating of other people or in our relationships with other people—using praise to get people to like us, or being critical and feeling superior, or actually feeling separate from people who are going through some difficulty of pain or loss and judging them for that. There's a lot of places we need to wake up about in this.

The last of these conditions is that of pleasure and pain, or joy and sorrow, happiness and unhappiness. We can really see how so much of our experience is just going through these. On retreat, where we're paying attention to our mind states, it becomes very clear, this alternation. We wake up and it's a good day. A few hours later something happens and there's some dissatisfaction or depression. We have lasagna for lunch and we're happy again. It can be as simple as that.

It's interesting—we can try to evaluate in a bigger way and think that we have more of one than the other, that there's some tendency we have. But again, they've done research and it's really not so. We can't be very objective about this. There's also a lot of interesting research these days on psychology and the way the mind works. One of the ones I found particularly interesting about this area is that people are actually very bad at predicting what will make them happy. Have you read that research? It's fascinating. We have these ideas about what it should be, but they don't match up.

The interesting thing is we don't learn. We still think those things should make us happy, and we're just not doing it quite right. The researcher says that instead of asking other people what worked for them or how it is to have this experience, people tend to think, "Oh, I'm unique. Whatever happened to them is going to be different, and I'll figure it out, and it'll be okay for me. I'll like working sixty hours a week in this job just to make money. It'll work for me." And they don't see that it's actually going to cause a lot of suffering.

A classic example is traveling, going on the big trip. It can be great to go on some trips, but a lot of the time, have you noticed, we're actually in some degree or other of dukkha. All the preparation to get ready, and then a thirteen-hour plane trip, which is no piece of cake—just jammed in there, the food is terrible, and we're complaining about that. Then we get there and we're lost, and the hotel's lost our reservation, and there we are wandering around this city with a guidebook, not knowing where we are or where we're going to have lunch, and we're hungry and tired. Then we come back from the trip and people say, "Well, how was it?" And we go, "It was wonderful!" Because that's what people expect us to say. That's what we think we should have experienced. But a lot of the time, it was actually pretty unpleasant. We have this idea we should be enjoying it, so we try to convince ourselves that we are enjoying it as we're seeing the thirteenth medieval palace and another Renaissance masterpiece. We don't get the message.

So we really need to begin to look at this. It's what we've been doing this whole retreat—really examining what the true sources of happiness are for us, where that can be found. We begin to see it's not in the external world. It's not in acquiring possessions or experiences. We see even that our own internal sense of pleasure and pain is subjective. If we look at something through the lens of mindfulness, what was painful, just through interest, can actually become pleasurable. So we see that they're not so fixed.

There's a saying: absence of pain is pleasure when you're old; absence of pleasure is pain when young. It's all relative. It's not that one thing is a certain way, or that we'll always relate to an experience in a certain way.

Christopher Titmus, one of our friends and teachers, talks about when he practiced in Thailand many years ago—about this monk who had secluded himself away in a cave and practiced very intensively. After a while, people noticed they hadn't seen him for some time, so they went up to see what had happened and discovered that he had died up in that cave practicing. But they found written on the wall of the cave: "Oh, what joy to know there is no happiness in the world."

Oh, what joy to know there is no happiness in the world. It only makes sense when you have a true understanding of what joy is in this definition, and what happiness is.

He's really talking about turning away from trying to find happiness out there in things, and the joy that can come from that turning.

As we've said again and again, the Buddha talked a lot about suffering, but he never talked about suffering without referring to it in the context of happiness, of freedom. By opening to suffering, by turning and facing it directly and knowing its nature, we can come to a place of far deeper happiness, far deeper freedom than we would ever have thought possible—through that willingness to actually connect with the difficulties in our lives.

So how do we work skillfully with these alternating conditions? Of course, the first thing is simply mindfulness of them—to be aware when they're happening, to see what our inclination is, what our way of relating to them is, to notice the grasping or the pushing away, to see all of the different strategies we use to hold on to the good ones and push away the bad ones. It can be fascinating to see the bending and contortions we'll do to try and accomplish that, and to really be willing to notice it. We'll modify our behavior. We'll change the things we say. Sometimes there are skillful ways of doing that, but this is when we're doing it unmindfully, when we're really just acting out of the sense that this is the only way I can find my happiness.

It's not to say that we should deny ourselves the pleasure of things when they're going well. This is not a teaching about that. It's simply recognizing the ephemeral nature of that kind of happiness and always being pointed back to looking for deeper ways of contacting happiness.

Again, Ajahn Chah: "The Buddha said you should know the world. It dazzles like a king's royal carriage. Fools are entranced, but the wise are not deceived. It's not that he wanted us to go all over the world looking at everything, studying everything about it. He simply wanted us to watch this mind, which is attached to it. When the Buddha told us to look at the world, he didn't want us to get stuck in it. He wanted us to investigate

it, because the world is born just in this mind. Sitting in the shade of a tree, you can look at the world. When there is desire, the world comes into being right there. Wanting is the birthplace of the world. To extinguish wanting is to extinguish the world."

We have plenty of opportunities to practice with this. The world is going to be constantly presenting us with these alternating pairs—it's the nature of things. So we don't have to go looking for them. We just have to notice which one is operating. On a relative level, we see their impermanent, ephemeral nature, their conditioned nature, born out of conditions—how they come and they go, how what one person praises us for another criticizes us for, how one day we can have something and the next day it's gone, whatever it might be. Whatever the time sequence, this is the truth of things.

We begin to see more clearly for ourselves: What is it in our mindfulness, in our relationship to our experience, in our wisdom, that increases happiness, increases the wholesome, is skillful? And what decreases the unwholesome, the unskillful? This is the source of true happiness.

It's a call for us to really know ourselves, to really be willing to stay present for these little movements of mind that try to convince us that getting something, holding on to something, is the answer. To see what we do in relationship to praise or to criticism, how much identification there is around those, and to see that actually letting go, disidentifying, is a truer source of well-being and contentment than any mode of grasping or holding on can ever be.

Because the question isn't so much whether these will affect us or whether we'll get out of balance with them. Of course we will. We're sensitive human beings who feel the impact of these things. The question about our practice and how to live in the world is: How quickly do we notice the push or pull of these conditions, and how relatively easily can we come back into balance and see them for what they are—these changing, conditioned experiences that it doesn't help to identify with or hold on to? That's the practice.

On the transcendent level, when we don't identify with them, when we don't see them as me or mine, there's a possibility of really being free of their impact. It's not that we don't enjoy them, but we see that clinging to them—in both the positive or the negative—ultimately brings us more suffering, is ultimately a source of dissatisfaction. They will change, and if we're caught in trying to hold on or in pushing away, we're bound to suffer.

Ajahn Chah says about this that the eight worldly conditions will always be with us. True success with them is having them be of equal value. Praise or blame, gain or loss—they're just the conditions of the world. They don't need to be the conditions of our inner experience. We can leave them there, out in the world.

There's a great sutta that is the teaching on this, the Loka Vipatti Sutta. Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates it as "The Failings of the World," and it talks about how, as an uneducated worldling, we get entranced by the comings and goings. Pain arises. We don't reflect that it's impermanent, conditioned, subject to change. And so we get consumed by it. But the same things happen to what he calls a well-instructed noble disciple.

But for that noble disciple, he reflects: these things have happened, but they are impermanent. They are subject to change. They're not me and mine. And so he doesn't get entranced with them. He doesn't welcome the arisen gain or rebel against arisen loss. She does not welcome arisen status or rebel against arisen disgrace.

And in this, as she thus abandons welcoming and rebelling, she is released from birth, aging, and death, from sorrows, lamentations, pain, distresses, and despairs. She is released, I tell you, from suffering and stress.

So just not getting caught in these is another doorway to the end of suffering, to liberation.

The sutta continues: "Knowing this, the wise person mindful ponders these changing conditions. Desirable things don't charm the mind. Undesirable ones bring no resistance. His welcoming and rebelling are scattered, gone to their end, do not exist. Knowing the dustless, sorrowless state, she discerns rightly, has gone beyond becoming to the further shore."

I'll end with Ajahn Chah once more. He said: "As wisdom matures and we begin to understand in accordance with the truth, we will no longer be dragged up and down. Usually, if we have a pleasant mood, we behave one way. And if we have an unpleasant mood, we are another way. We like something and we are up. We dislike something and we are down. In this way, we are still in conflict with enemies. When these things no longer oppose us, they become stabilized and balance out. There are no longer ups or downs or highs and lows. We understand these things of the world and know that's just the way it is. It's just worldly dhamma.

"Worldly dhamma changes to become the path. Worldly dhamma has eight ways. The path has eight ways. Wherever worldly dhamma exists, the path is to be found also. When we live with clarity, all of our worldly experiences become the practicing of the

Eightfold Path. Without clarity, worldly dhammas predominate and we are turned away from the path. When right understanding arises, liberation from suffering lies right here before us. You will not find liberation by running around looking elsewhere."

CHAPTER 50

Practice in Daily Life

Andrea Fella · 59 min

In this deeply practical talk delivered at a transition point in the three-month retreat, Andrea Fella addresses one of the most common concerns practitioners face: how to maintain and cultivate mindfulness when returning to daily life. Drawing extensively from her own experience—including her early practice before any formal meditation instruction—she offers concrete, accessible methods for weaving awareness into ordinary activities.

Fella describes her technique of choosing specific "mindfulness projects": one neutral activity that occurs regularly throughout the day (like switching between computer programs) and one challenging emotional pattern (such as anger). She explains how consistent resolve to notice these experiences gradually brings awareness closer to the moment of occurrence, eventually transforming routine activities into mindfulness bells. Her personal story of working with overwhelming anger—eventually seeing the moment of choice before reactivity—powerfully illustrates how daily life practice can lead to genuine liberation from habitual patterns.

The talk expands to include working with the pāramīs (perfections) as daily life practice, using creative approaches like the "Safeway as mettā monastery." Fella introduces a reflective meditation practice taught by Ajahn Amaro for exploring one's relationship to qualities like sīla (virtue). She emphasizes the importance of observing intention, particularly in speech, recommending the practice of pausing before speaking to reveal motivation. The teaching concludes with Bhikkhu Bodhi's insight on why the precepts are stated negatively—because inner qualities like love and compassion arise from inner work, not external rules.

We're at a real transition point in the retreat right now. I noticed as I came into the hall that there were quite a few yogis huddled around the board looking at the schedule change for tomorrow. This is the outward manifestation of the shift that's happening. The schedule is going to be changing. Speaking is going to begin after three months or six weeks of being in silence. That's a huge shift.

It's an interesting time in the retreat. I'm sure many of you, if not all of you, have seen your thoughts shift to what's going to be happening next—future thoughts, planning. What are the next few days going to be like? What is it going to be like when I go

home? Often at this point in retreat, people are wondering: How am I going to take this practice home with me? How can I bring some of what I've learned here into my daily life?

The structure of retreat is ideal for cultivating mindfulness. It's ideal for concentration and continuity of mindfulness. And our daily lives are not that way. The other night, Sally talked about the eight worldly winds, and we get blown around by all of those conditions—the conditions of praise and blame, gain and loss, pain and pleasure, fame and disrepute. Truly, this practice is going against the current of our culture. So it's challenging to bring this practice into our life outside of intensive retreat. That's what I'd like to talk about this evening.

This is a topic that I really love. It's been a very integral part of my own practice. In fact, when I began my practice, I wasn't at all interested in sitting meditation. I didn't even think I would ever do that. I thought, why would anybody do that? But I was having a great deal of difficulty, in particular with some overwhelming emotions, and I was very interested in understanding my mind. As I began my practice, I started looking at my mind in daily life using mindfulness techniques that I read about. At some point, after about three months of this—when I began to have some real insights into how my mind functioned—I realized that maybe the reason they call it practice is because it helps to practice sitting on a cushion, and then you can take it more into your daily life. So that's why I began sitting.

This practice of daily life mindfulness was my first practice, and I'd like to share with you some of what I've learned about bringing mindfulness practice into daily life through examples of ways that I've practiced myself. It's going to be a really practical talk.

In those first few months of my practice, I read a book by Joko Beck called *Everyday Zen*. I had another one by her around that same time called *Nothing Special*. In one of those two books, she talked about working at bringing our practice into daily life and said it's not such a good idea to think that you're going to be able to be continuously mindful throughout the day. Don't even try for that because it's just setting yourself up for failure. She suggested instead picking a few projects—mindfulness projects to work on—where you could begin to see yourself connecting with those things.

I really connected with this idea of not trying to be mindful throughout the day. In my early twenties, I had read a book which many of you have probably heard of: Thich Nhat Hanh's *Miracle of Mindfulness*. I loved this book. I read it every evening before I went to bed and thought, wow, this sounds so cool, this mindfulness stuff. I'm going to do this tomorrow when I go to work. And the next time I would remember it would be

when I picked up the book the next night. After some nights of that, I thought, well, obviously I can't do this. I put the book aside and didn't meet mindfulness again for another fifteen years.

But when I did meet it again, I was in a highly motivated state because I was in some very difficult emotional states that were making me almost non-functional at times. So I was very motivated to see what could be done. How could I meet these states of mind?

After reading these books by Joko Beck, I decided to pick two projects in my day. One was an emotion that was just completely out of control for me, one that was making my life quite difficult at times. It was a very strong anger that I was experiencing. The other was a very neutral experience that happened throughout my day. I was a Peace Corps volunteer at the time, working in the development bank in the country where I was assigned as a computer volunteer.

One of the things I did regularly throughout my day was to switch between DOS and Windows on the computer. So I picked this as my other project. I'm going to notice. I'm going to be mindful when I switch between DOS and Windows.

Now, I didn't know much about mindfulness at this point. I had had no instructions, no teachers telling me what to do. I had just read this book. So I didn't have a lot of tools for these projects, but just this idea of "be mindful." I didn't actually know much. But I began working with this.

With this neutral event, initially I often found that I remembered long after the event had happened many times. I would be going to bed at night and I'd remember: I had told myself I was going to pay attention when I switched between DOS and Windows, and I didn't remember it once today.

Well, fortunately, to my credit, this time I didn't say, "Obviously I can't do this." I just said, "I'm going to try again." And this is one of the keys to practice in daily life—this "I'm going to try again," just noticing when you have not been mindful and making the resolve to try again.

So fortunately I had this somehow. This resolve came up, and I just continued saying to myself, "I'm going to notice this. I'm going to pay attention to this." And when I look back on it, actually, that moment of remembering—that's the first moment of mindfulness beginning around that particular thing. So even though I didn't remember right while I was switching between DOS and Windows, even though I remembered when I was going to bed at night, that was the first stirring. The mindfulness was beginning in that moment of remembering.

It's just like coming back to the breath. Just like waking up and realizing, "Oh, I've forgotten. I'm not with the breath." In that moment there is mindfulness, and we come back. So in this case, I couldn't come back to switching between DOS and Windows because I was going to bed at night, but I made that resolve: I'll keep trying.

And what happened is that over time—over days, even weeks of making this resolve—I began to notice that I was remembering closer to the event. I would remember at the end of the morning, for example, right before lunch. "Oh, I forgot." And then it got to the point where I'd remember a few minutes after it happened, and I could begin to see—I actually could see—oh, this resolve is actually getting me closer to the event, this resolve to wake up for this particular thing. And at some point, I remembered right after it happened. Just right after. "Oh, it just happened."

The other thing I was doing in this whole exercise was that when I remembered, I was just noticing, "Well, I'm mindful now. I remembered now. What's happening right now?" Just taking that in, in a very light way.

And at some point, right as I was switching between DOS and Windows, I remembered. And right around that point, that event—the switching between DOS and Windows—became like a mindfulness bell for me. As I switched between DOS and Windows, it triggered the mindfulness to arise during that activity.

So this is one technique I really like to suggest to people in practice in daily life: picking something neutral that happens regularly throughout your day and resolving to pay attention to it. Bringing the mindfulness to that over and over again. And it will begin to function as a mindfulness bell for you.

As you are in that experience of whatever your chosen activity is, just in a very light way, notice what's going on. What's the attitude in the mind? What's the bodily posture? Is there tension? Is there tightness? And this is not something to try to hold on to. It's not like trying to grasp onto the mindfulness at this point and say, "Okay, now I'm going to stay mindful." Just in a really light way, noticing what's happening right now.

If you pick something that happens regularly throughout your day—I picked something that was happening every fifteen or twenty minutes for me during my workday—

It begins to bring a thread of mindfulness throughout your day—just a few moments of check-in, check-in, check-in to what's happening. So that's one way I worked with one of these projects.

The other project I picked was working with my strong anger. This unfolded quite differently. In this case, the anger was so powerful, so strong, and I was really out of control around it. The anger would just get stronger and stronger until at some point I would remember, "Oh, I said I was going to pay attention to this." And by the time I remembered, I was in a full-blown rage.

I remember the first few times I did this, it was like, "Oh yeah, I said I was going to pay attention to this. What am I supposed to do with this? Wow, this is really unpleasant. Yeah, I'm angry." I had no tools about paying attention to the body. I hadn't had any meditation instruction at all, but I knew I was angry. I could tell the unpleasantness of it. But beyond that, I didn't know what to do. What does it mean even to be mindful of this? I really was kind of clueless.

But simply that recognition—anger, I'm angry, this is anger—just that simple recognition actually ended up being extremely powerful. Because over the course of several months of continuing to resolve to wake up for this anger, I noticed this interesting pattern: I began to wake up a little bit earlier in the process of the anger.

I'm sure most of you are familiar with the escalating nature of anger, how it can start and then, if we're caught in it or hooked by the story, it just gets stronger and stronger and builds. It's like the snowball effect of anger rolling. So I began to notice that I was waking up a little earlier in the process, that I would remember I wanted to pay attention to this anger before I was in such a full-blown rage. I remembered when I was more at a normal state of anger. And at that point I could again recognize, "Okay, I'm angry." I also noticed it wasn't quite as unpleasant as the full-blown rage.

Just keeping that vow to come back, come back, I began breaking in earlier and earlier until it was more like just an irritation. I was beginning to see how the mindfulness was giving me some space around this anger. It was huge. It was huge for me not to be in a rage when thoughts around this particular person that I was angry with came up in my mind.

And then one day—this was a few months into my working with mindfulness in daily life—I was cutting an apple in my kitchen. I was fairly present. I think the techniques I had been using, noticing the switching between DOS and Windows, paying attention to the anger, had created a kind of base of general mindfulness. I was cutting the apple, and I noticed a thought appear in my mind. The thought was being with the person I was angry with at a fruit stand. I could see the connection between what I was doing, cutting the apple, and the memory.

And I could also see in that moment that I was not angry, that anger hadn't come up. But what I felt was this—it was like a freight train of wanting to jump on that thought and think more thoughts to become angry. I was kind of amazed. It's like, wow, the mind actually *wants* to be angry. But I also saw in that moment that I had a choice. I don't have to get on. I don't have to think those thoughts.

And I stood there waiting to get angry. Because I had never had this—in the last six months or so, or three or four months since I started this practice, I had not had this person arise in my mind without anger arising. So I thought there was no way to decouple them. And I stood there waiting to get angry, and I didn't get angry.

I was so blown away by that moment. That moment is the one that really convinced me of the power of mindfulness. This is a path. This is a path that we can use to free ourselves. It was so clear to me in that moment—the freedom from suffering that was apparent in that moment.

This can happen in our daily lives. This kind of mindfulness can free us from patterns. We don't actually have to always be sitting on retreat for this kind of work to happen. It can happen in our daily lives.

I teach what I call a householder retreat, based on the model of the sandwich retreat taught at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center in Boston. It's a daily life practice retreat where we meet Sunday and Saturday for a half day and a day long, and then morning and evening every day during the week to support this practice of daily life mindfulness.

I encourage people in this retreat to pick some projects to pay attention to. I definitely encourage them to pick something neutral that happens throughout the day, and some other kind of project—something that either might be up for them, something they have some juice for, or just some other kinds of activities. There's so many things that we can bring into our practice. And it's helpful to make them practices, to pick things, to actually choose practices to do, as opposed to just saying, "Oh well, I'm going to be mindful." When we lose the structure of retreat, it's helpful to create some kind of structure in our daily life practice. So choosing some projects.

There's so many different things you could use. I've used quite a few of them over the course of my practice, so I'll just mention a few. Noticing getting up from my desk at work—the act of standing. Waiting for three rings of the telephone before picking it up. This one is good; I got it from Thich Nhat Hanh. It's a nice practice because when you actually pick up the phone, you're mindful and there for the person on the other end.

The whole process of going to the bathroom—you do that probably four or five times a day at least. Three or four minutes of paying attention to that whole process, from the getting up, the choosing, the knowing, the awareness of needing to do that, to the whole process of walking into the restroom, doing everything, washing your hands, coming out. I did this at work for a while. I had noticed that when I went to the restroom my mind was racing as fast as it had been before when I was doing my job. And I realized that it wasn't particularly necessary. So I started doing this practice, and I began to see that when I connected with my experience, in those three or four minutes after I came back from the restroom, I felt like I'd had a little mini vacation. Three minutes. I didn't actually need to be thinking about my work in that time. It's a great thing, this mindfulness.

Chores are a really great place to bring mindfulness practice to. And again, it's really helpful to pick something, to choose it, to actually say, "Okay, for the next two weeks, this is going to be my daily life practice activity." Chores, chopping vegetables, making your bed, brushing your teeth—all of the things that we do here in daily life that we've become familiar with bringing mindfulness to. It will dissipate as you leave the retreat. That's not anything you've done wrong; it's simply the way it is. But we can consciously choose to bring mindfulness to certain things. And with a resolve, with a determination, with patience, we can cultivate this mindfulness.

I found that the yogi jobs here on retreat were a great support for the transition to daily life practice. Whatever yogi job you've had here—chopping vegetables, cleaning the bathrooms, vacuuming, sweeping, whatever it is—when you go home, that might be one thing, one of the tasks you choose to have be one of your projects. I've learned so much about mindfulness in daily life through the yogi jobs, just ways to be present.

It doesn't have to be the kind of really detailed, precise mindfulness. Sayadaw U Tejaniya speaks about a fifty-fifty mindfulness: fifty percent of your attention on what you're doing and fifty percent of your attention on the awareness of what you're doing. It can be really light. Know what you're doing while you're doing it. It doesn't have to be broken down into the impermanence of every single movement. Just knowing you're pushing the vacuum cleaner while you're pushing it, and a sense of whether there's tension or ease.

I'd like to restate one of the pieces I said a little bit earlier. When you choose to do some of these practices, you're not going to remember right away. You're going to forget.

When you first remember that you've forgotten, that doesn't mean you've failed. That's the first moment of success. That's the first moment it begins. So just resolve again: I'm going to do this. I'm going to keep trying.

For me, this practice of cultivating mindfulness through these projects has been very helpful. You can pick something for a couple of weeks or even a month and then move on to another thing. I find it helpful to keep refreshing or picking new projects because the old ones get a little stale. We kind of think we've figured it out and then it gets a little bit lost. But in picking new projects, I find that the old ones don't completely go away. If I picked going through doorways for one week and turning on light switches another week, when I'm turning on light switches, I'm also noticing the going through doors. So it begins to thread this mindfulness throughout our day to do this kind of practice. This has been the foundation for me of just beginning to get mindfulness into daily life.

Another area I have worked with for practice in daily life has been around the paramis. We've mentioned these a couple of times. These are qualities of mind that we cultivate as we practice the path—the qualities that the Bodhisattva was said to have cultivated for many, many lifetimes before he became the Buddha. The stories of the Buddha cultivating these qualities are told in the Jataka tales, a few of which you heard last night. These qualities are cultivated as we practice, they are said to be necessary for awakening, and they are also the qualities of the awakened heart: generosity, virtue, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, resolve, loving-kindness, equanimity.

In Asia, these practices are considered to be the realm of daily life practice. So these are really good qualities to look at in our daily lives. There are two basic ways to work with any quality of mind, and for the paramis these approaches are very helpful. One way is to find ways to practice cultivating the quality of mind, the parami itself—the generosity, the virtue, the loving-kindness. Another way is to look at its opposite, what gets in its way. Look at when we're not feeling kind, when we're feeling impatient. Looking at it from both sides.

One of the first ways I began working with these qualities was simply to help myself remember to pay attention to them—to remember the qualities themselves and highlight them in places where I might otherwise forget. So I took little pieces of paper and wrote the paramis on them and put them around my house in places where they might be helpful. Truthfulness went on the telephone. Generosity went on the door as I walked out, to remind myself to bring a generosity of heart to the people I met. Equan-

imity went on the computer. Patience went on the bathroom mirror because I noticed that impatience arose frequently when I was brushing my teeth. Little things just to help me remember the qualities in places where they would serve me.

With the paramis practice, I find creativity is really wonderful. For instance, loving-kindness has a very formal practice of cultivation with the phrases. We have been working with some of those practices—the loving-kindness practice, the mudita practice, the compassion practice, the equanimity practice. We can use these practices in our daily life, not simply on the meditation cushion but moving out into the world. At one point, I decided I would use the Safeway as my metta monastery. Every time I walked into the Safeway, I would just start wishing loving-kindness to whoever I saw. There's a lot of suffering in the grocery store. It felt like a really good thing to do, to bring that quality into the grocery store. So we can be playful and creative with these paramis.

Come up with your own practices.

Generosity. My teacher Gil Fronsdal likes to suggest putting a $20 bill in your pocket with the intention of giving it away, and then watching what happens around that exploration. See where there's resistance, what judgments come up around it. When you finally choose to give it away, what is that inspiration? What is the motivation?

So creativity—we can get really playful with coming up with ways to cultivate these qualities. And then again, sticking to them for a little while. When I practiced the Safeway meditation, I think I probably did that for a couple of months, just using that practice.

One of my favorite practices that brought both mindfulness and loving kindness into my day regularly is that I take a walk. I take a walk most days when I'm at home in California. I've not been able to do that here so much—the weather is not quite so friendly as it is in California. On this walk, I would tend to take it at about the same time of day, and I would see the same people. I would try to be generally mindful on my walk, but I really wanted to be present when I passed somebody. That was my practice: to be present and to connect with whoever I met.

Sometimes the person clearly didn't want to say hello or look at me in the eye or anything. I certainly didn't want to push it or make them uncomfortable, so in those moments I would just do metta for the person. But over the course of weeks and months, as I took the same walk and began seeing the same people, they became familiar with me and I became familiar with them. We began exchanging a smile and a hello. Just

practicing with that connection, that kindness, that openness—the metta quality of simply connecting with somebody—I began to experience a lot of happiness in that connection. It was quite astounding, actually.

I remember this one older man who had to shuffle along, kind of unsteady on his feet, and he had the most beautiful smile when I met him. He looked just radiant when he smiled. As I continued this practice, when I would see him, I would begin to feel happy just in anticipation of his smile. Then I began to check into how long the happiness lasted—not trying to hold on to it, but just curious. I noticed that it lasted thirty or forty seconds after seeing him. This great upwelling of joy and appreciation and happiness and connection. Thirty seconds for a smile. It was such a joy to bring that into my day.

Play with it.

Observing the opposite quality of mind is also very interesting in terms of looking at these paramis. For a time, as I was paying attention to these paramis, I noticed that patience was one that I did not seem to have very much of. So I started looking at impatience—just noticing it, noticing when it came up, noticing what it felt like when it happened.

I began to see there were kind of two flavors of impatience. There was the impatience to get over something unpleasant, and the impatience of wanting to have something pleasant that I was expecting or anticipating. There was an impatience around brushing my teeth, a sense of, "I've got better things to do than brush my teeth." It was everywhere, actually. When I began looking at it, I began to see how pervasive it was throughout my day, coming up over and over again. It could be just little tiny things, but just this movement of impatience.

One day, about two months into this practice of looking at impatience, I was walking down the street and I felt this surge of impatience come up about—I don't know what at the moment—but just the surge of impatience. And the very next moment or thought was, "I've been looking at this impatience for two months. When is it going to go away?" Oh, there it is again. More impatience. I just had to laugh. It's like, oh well, this is just the mind.

Looking at all of these things from both sides is very helpful in our daily life.

Another practice I'll describe now involves working with the paramis, though it's more generally applicable, actually.

It's a reflective practice. We can use it to reflect on our relationship to these qualities, our relationship to these parami qualities. But it can also be used to reflect on pretty much anything in our daily lives in a meditative way. So it's an actual reflective practice, but it uses a meditative stillness to hold the practice. This practice was taught to me by Ajahn Amaro.

The practice is to basically settle and still the mind for five minutes or so. Quiet the mind. Pay attention to the body, the breathing. And have a topic before you sit down—pick a topic that you want to reflect on. Have a phrase in your mind, a word that you want to use as the seed for that reflection.

If you want to reflect on these qualities of the paramis, at one point I did this with the quality of virtue, of sila. I wanted to understand or to reflect on what the benefits of sila were. So that was the phrase I chose, the question I chose in my mind: What are the benefits of sila?

Settle your mind for about five minutes and then drop the question into the meditation. Simply ask the question in words in your mind. And then the practice is to not think about the answer, but to simply see what bubbles up. It's kind of like dropping a stone into a clear, settled pool and watching the ripples. Drop the question into your meditation and see what happens. What does the body do? Do thoughts appear? Just notice what happens. And then let go of that. Don't chain off of that. Don't think about that in the moment. Just come back to the silence, back to the breath, back to the body. Drop the question in again. See what happens.

When I did this with sila, I chose to do this for about ten minutes a day, asking this question about what the benefits of sila are. After that ten minutes, I had a pad of paper next to me, and I wrote down what I had experienced. No thinking about it particularly, just noticing, writing down what I had noticed. I noticed loneliness. I noticed contraction. I noticed an opening. I noticed a feeling of flow. Whatever it was, these thoughts—I just wrote down what I had experienced. Then after a couple of weeks of that, I reviewed my notes and began actually thinking about what I had seen, bringing the thinking process in.

This kind of practice can be used to explore our relationship to the paramis, or it can actually be used to explore our relationship to anything that we want to bring a meditative, reflective quality to—a choice that we have to make. This kind of practice can be very supportive for that.

So, cultivating mindfulness in our day, bringing awareness of the paramis. The third piece I'd like to talk about is intention. We've talked about intention here quite a bit. It's that subtle movement or energetic impulse that precedes any act of body, speech, or mind. We can know we're going to move before we move. We can know we're going to speak before we speak. We can know we're going to think before we think, or know that we're inclining toward an emotion before the emotion appears—as I described in that example of the anger, seeing the memory, seeing the inclination toward the anger, and seeing the choice.

We can see this in our daily lives as well as on retreat. It's more difficult, I grant you—quite a bit more difficult—but it is possible. So it's a really good place to explore. Now the intention itself, as we've mentioned, is neutral. It's a neutral event. But accompanying it are the factors of mind that give it its direction and its momentum.

Whether they're wholesome or unwholesome, this gives the intention its karmic quality. The karmic results of the intention arise as a result of whether there are wholesome or unwholesome factors in the mind accompanying that intention, and whether we act on it.

So as we know, as we get in touch with that intention, as we get in touch with knowing what's going to happen before it happens, we can see the motivation as well. In that moment of knowing "I'm going to get up to get a glass of water," I can know the motivation. The motivation might arise for many reasons. It might be simply because thirst has arisen, or it might be because I'm really frustrated with what I'm doing and I just want to get away from my computer right now. So in that moment of seeing "I'm about to get up," we can see the motivation. Very, very helpful information.

One excellent place to practice with this is in the area of speech. I know everyone in this room has probably had the experience of wishing they could have taken something back that they had said, of realizing just after something came out of our mouth, "Oh, I shouldn't have said that." So paying attention to speech is a very large area that we can work with in our daily life. And it's come up in the questions a few times, bringing awareness to our speech. It's extremely challenging. At least for me, it has been one of the most challenging places to bring mindfulness to.

Much of the time, we speak kind of automatically without even knowing what we're going to say, much less do we have any sense or idea of how it's going to impact the person we're speaking to, or understand the motivation behind what we're saying. One of the most powerful ways to break into this is to pause before you speak. That in itself is challenging—simply remembering to pause. If you can remember to pause before you speak, you have caught the intention to speak. You know you're going to speak before

you speak. In that pause, you will probably know what you're going to say before you say it. And you will also probably have a sense of why you're going to speak. So this simple practice of pausing can reveal many things about our speech to us.

Getting in touch with our motivations for our speech can really be humbling. We really begin to see how often we speak out of wanting to make ourselves look good, or wanting to subtly put somebody else down, or even outright hurt somebody. Most of the time, though, it seems—at least in my experience—it seems to be with this little bit of "me, me, me," this motivation to present myself, to make myself appear a certain way.

So beginning to see this with this pause, just noticing this pause—when you break silence tomorrow, I highly recommend this practice. You have enough mindfulness to do this. Really, I highly recommend this practice. And notice, you can even remind each other about this when you start talking to each other: "Let's try this. Let's try doing this pause."

It can be, as I mentioned, kind of humbling. The first time I tried this with one friend, we sat down. We were having a meal together, and we decided we were going to work this way with each other in our speech. And I saw a thought. I saw I was going to say something, and I saw the motivation. I thought, "No, I'm not going to say that. Unwholesome motivation." The next thing arose—nope, not going to say that. Next thing—nope, not going to say that. At some point I had to say to him, "I'm sitting here ruling out things to say because of unwholesome motivation." So it can be interesting. It's helpful to do this with another practitioner when you try this, because it can put some gaps in the conversation.

This practice of looking at our intention—speech is one powerful place to explore it. But if you're doing some of these other practices that I recommended or suggested, like picking something that you do regularly throughout the day—clicking send for an email, something that you do regularly—opening doors, extending and bending your arm—if it's some kind of action, you can begin to see the intention associated with that action. So when I was playing with standing up at my desk at work, I got to the point where I knew I was going to stand. I could see that I was going to stand before the standing happened. I could see the intention to stand. I could see why I was going to stand.

Most of the time it had to do with something around work—I need to go get a copy from the printout. But we can begin to connect with this intention on a regular basis and connect with observing the motivation that goes with it. So this is not simply a practice that is accessible to us on retreat. It is possible to experience and see these things in our daily lives.

Another large area of practice in our daily lives is around sila, around ethics. And this is one way to work with motivation, to work with seeing our intention. The way I like to work with the five lay precepts in my daily life is to use them as mindfulness bells, kind of as I was describing these other activities. If I'm making a movement towards wrong speech, if I'm making a movement towards killing an ant, looking at what's going on—it's kind of like a wake-up bell. What's happening? So looking at the motivation if there's a movement to break one of these precepts.

Working with these precepts, I'm sure you've all noticed that they're stated in the negative—actions to avoid. Refrain from killing, refrain from stealing, refrain from sexual misconduct, refrain from lying, refrain from intoxication. But they're also paired—I think Guy mentioned this—with a positive quality, a wholesome quality that is cultivated as we refrain from the action. Refraining from killing is paired with compassion. Refraining from stealing with honesty and contentment. Refraining from sexual misconduct is said to be related to fidelity. Refraining from lying to truthfulness. Refraining from intoxication is cultivating clarity of mind or heedfulness.

There's a mutual connection between our mind and our body. The act of abstaining from certain actions through the precepts has a rebound effect on our mind. And the point of interconnection between the mind and the body is this intention and the qualities of motivation that go with it. So in the intention to refrain from killing, there can come along this intention towards compassion.

I saw this myself, actually. At one point, I was really working with the ants in my kitchen and not wanting to kill them, so I had this elaborate way of working with the ants when they came in. I would corral them with soap so they wouldn't go outside the line, and I'd slowly work them back to the hole that they were coming from. After a while, I noticed I got a little impatient, and I'd start scooping the ants up and putting them by their hole so that I could move them along a little more quickly.

I began observing the ants pretty carefully as I was doing this. And I saw at one point near the hole where they were coming in, one of the ants on its back legs, with its front legs up in the air, doing this scanning of the environment. I could just see the panic. Maybe this is anthropomorphizing, I don't know, but it seemed like there was this kind of alarm going on in the ant population around this event. And I just felt so much compassion. It was quite startling to see that. Just this act of wishing to not kill them brought a connection between me and these beings.

Sometimes people question, particularly in California where I live, why these precepts are stated in the negative. Why can't they be stated positively? California is a really happy place—we talk about vowing to cultivate love and generosity. So sometimes there's that question about why they're stated in the negative.

I read a wonderful response to this question that I'd like to share with you to close this evening. It's written by Bhikkhu Bodhi, who is one of the main translators of the suttas—a wonderful, thoughtful being:

"One reason why the precepts are worded in terms of abstinence is that the development of positive virtues cannot be prescribed by rules. Rules of training can govern what we have to avoid and perform in our outer actions, but only ideals of aspiration, not rules, can govern what we develop in ourselves. Thus we cannot take up a training rule to always be loving towards others. To impose such a rule is to place ourselves in a double bind, since inner attitudes are just simply not so docile that they can be determined by command. Love and compassion are the fruits of work we do on ourselves inwardly, not of assenting to a precept. What we can do is to undertake a precept to abstain from destroying life and from injuring other beings. Then we can make a resolution, preferably without much fanfare, to develop loving kindness and apply ourselves to the mental training designed to nourish its growth."

CHAPTER 51

Joseph's Dharma Story - Part 2

Joseph Goldstein · 1h07

> *In this deeply personal continuation of his dharma story, Joseph Goldstein traces his spiritual journey from the early 1970s through recent years, offering invaluable perspective for practitioners leaving intensive retreat. He recounts the organic beginnings of his teaching career under Anagārika Munindraji's guidance, the founding of IMS in 1976, and the serendipitous encounters that shaped Western vipassanā.*
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> *Joseph shares transformative periods of practice, including intensive work with Sayadaw U Paṇḍita that taught him the art of right effort—finding balance between pushing edges and releasing expectation. He describes how the brahmavihāra practices revealed the deep interconnection between mettā and vipassanā, and how Dzogchen teachings initially seemed foreign until he recognized their compatibility with insight practice.*
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> *The talk's profound heart emerges in Joseph's account of a spiritual crisis when his Burmese and Tibetan teachers offered seemingly contradictory views on the nature of awakening. His resolution—reframing the question from "who's right?" to "is there one dharma of liberation embracing both?"—led to the liberating insight that all teachings are skillful means for freeing the mind, not statements of ultimate truth. He concludes with subtle teachings on recognizing the empty nature of awareness itself, drawing from the Buddha's enlightenment verse: "Achieved is the end of craving." The practice becomes moment-to-moment investigation of whether the mind is clinging or free.*

During part one of this retreat, I gave a talk about the beginnings of my own Dharma journey and the many ups and downs of practice in those years. I left off at a point in the early 70s when I first began teaching. I thought tonight I would just pick up the thread of that talk and speak about the years since then—the unfolding path of both practice and teaching since the early 70s. Hopefully it will give you some perspective and perhaps be of some help as you're leaving this time of intensive practice after six weeks or three months and beginning your journey in the world again.

In 1973, I had already been in India for about six or seven years, practicing and studying mostly with my first two teachers, Anagarika Munindra and S. N. Goenkaji. The teaching began very organically. It wasn't like all of a sudden you're teaching. Munindraji suggested, after I had been there for quite some time, that he would just encour-

age some of the newer meditators to come speak to me if they had questions about their practice. So for a year or so, it was just like that—people would come and ask questions. Then I started leading some discussion groups.

That was interesting because there was one guy in those early groups who was very smart, slightly aggressive, with very challenging questions. Here I was, just beginning to try to share the Dharma, and he was always putting me on the spot with these really difficult questions. So even though it was not easy and not even fun, it was great training.

I was reminded of a story of somebody going to a Zen sword master to be trained. In the first few years, the master had this student just do errands around the temple. After some time, just as the student was wandering around, the Zen master would pop out from behind a bush and whack him on the head. He kept doing this at completely unexpected times until the student had to be aware and alert in every moment. Well, this guy with these questions was a little like that. So I'm actually quite grateful.

After some time of doing that, Munindraji asked me if I would lead a short retreat and give some more formal Dharma talks. I could say that was really the beginning of the formal aspect of teaching. I remember the very first talk I gave, still quite vivid in my mind—it was on bare attention. In that talk, I used a Zen haiku poem, which for many years was sort of my signature haiku on retreats. It has fallen into disuse in these last years, but I thought I would bring it back just for old time's sake. And it's really in response to a question that was asked the other night: What exactly is awareness? What is mindfulness?

This is the haiku. I think it's by Basho. He said, "The old pond, a frog jumps in. Plop."

So awareness, mindfulness, is plop mind. It's not "the old pond, a frog jumps in, what a beautiful evening it was, it was so romantic." Not a big descriptive thing. Old pond, frog jumps in, plop. Just the sound. To be right in the sound of it. That's mindfulness. That's awareness. So we want to keep plop mind.

In 74, my body started acting up a bit, and I was having a lot of back trouble. I was still in India, but it was really quite difficult. At that time, I decided to come back to the States. I had no idea really what I would do. I had spent basically all of my 20s in Asia—first in the Peace Corps and then practicing and studying in India. So in 74, I was 30 years old, came back, no idea what to do. I ended up traveling across country from upstate New York out to California with some friends.

While I had been in India in just the last few years, I had met Ram Dass in Bodh Gaya and we had become quite friendly. So I get to Berkeley and I thought, well, he may have some ideas of what I might do. He knew of my involvement in the practice. So I called up the place he was staying and I was told that it was one of the days he wasn't seeing people. I mean, I had traveled 3,000 miles, and we were close friends. But it was one of those days. So I said, okay, let's just see what happens.

So I'm walking down the streets of Berkeley, and I had to go to the bathroom. I went into one restaurant, asked if I could use the restroom, and they said no—it was only for customers. Well, coming from India, this was like incomprehensible. So I walked down the street and went into a second restaurant. Can I use the restroom? No. It was pretty amazing. I walked down the street, went into a third restaurant, and there's Ram Dass. Who knows?

So we sit down together, start talking, and he invited me to teach with him the meditation section of a big course he was teaching at Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. This was the first summer that Naropa, this Buddhist experiment, this Buddhist college, opened in Boulder. And it was kind of like a Buddhist Woodstock experience—the first gathering of people from all over the country and even the world who were interested in Eastern meditation and philosophy. Ram Dass had this huge class on the Bhagavad Gita. Trungpa Rinpoche was teaching the basics of Vajrayana Buddhism. There was huge excitement. A lot of young people had come there. And I was teaching the meditation section of Ram Dass's class.

It was great. There was so much interest—I was doing maybe six or seven sessions a day. And there were 1,500 people in his class. It was a huge, huge thing. Out of that teaching at Naropa in the summer of 1974, the seeds were planted for the whole Vipassana scene in this country. People got very interested in wanting to pursue the practice.

From that summer of '74, a month-long course was set up in the Sequoia National Forest in California. We had, I don't remember exactly, but thirty-five people, maybe forty people coming for a month there. We were all living in tents. It was a very makeshift operation. Before going down to that retreat, a whole bunch of us were just sleeping on friends' floors in Berkeley. Somebody had this old dilapidated truck. We bought all the food for the retreat, loaded it on the truck. Halfway down to the Sequoia Forest, the truck caught on fire.

But somehow, we were young, full of energy, none of it mattered. There was a tremendous kind of fresh enthusiasm for this incredibly exciting undertaking—a month retreat. None of us had even contemplated doing something like that in this country.

And in those early years, it was a very grassroots kind of movement. There was no organization. It was just a group of people. We'd get together in different places around the country. Let's put on a retreat. We would just be going. Jack Kornfield and Sharon Salzberg at that time and myself, and then later other teachers as well, would just be moving from place to place. It was kind of like a circuit rabbi going around.

After some time of this we thought, it might be nice to have a center where people could come to practice. This was the first intimation of what IMS would become. Little did we know what creating a center would mean. But we had friends living in Massachusetts, and they were looking around for a place. Then in 1975, before this place was found, we had the idea to teach a long retreat. We had done the month-long in Sequoia and then just week or nine-day, ten-day courses. So we had the idea: let's do a three-month course. Many of us had practiced for extended periods in India.

So we rented a place up in Bucksport, Maine—it was a convent, I think, and they were renting the facility. We had a lot of enthusiasm, but we were very naive about what it all meant and how to do it.

In '75, Bob Dylan was beginning his Rolling Thunder concert tour. And unbelievably, he was having a concert in Bangor, Maine during the three-month retreat. What did I know? I had never even been to a rock concert. But I saw Bob Dylan's coming—Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell—let's take all the yogis to the concert! Well, that was my brilliant idea. Fortunately, my colleagues outvoted me. But that's how things were.

It was actually the nuns at Bucksport, at that convent—we were talking about how we were looking for a place, and they suggested contacting the diocese in Worcester, the Catholic diocese. So our friends down here called them, and they had this place. It was run by the Fathers of the Blessed Sacrament. There were only twelve priests left in the building, so they really did need to sell. It was this huge place. For us, it was a really big thing—I mean, we were just a bunch of young people recently back from India who didn't really know what we were doing. And even though from the perspective of today's standards it was amazingly cheap—this whole complex on ninety acres of land was $150,000—back then in '75 and '76, $150,000 was enormous. We barely had $100. So it was just this huge thing.

And again, it's just amazing. It feels like this whole journey has been blessed by the devas. A few friends who had a little family money and were actually working—we needed to raise $50,000 for the down payment. And somehow we managed to gather $35,000 from a few different friends. I had no idea where the rest would come from.

So I'm teaching—this was the second summer at Boulder, at Naropa—teaching various classes. I'm just sitting in my apartment, and one day this young woman walks in who had been in one of the classes. She said, "I just inherited some money. I have $15,000. I don't quite know what to do with it. Do you have any use for it?" Do I have a use for it? So that was the last piece. And this is like just walking in the front door. It does make one wonder just what forces—what dharma forces—there are in the world.

Still, even when we had the money, there was a lot of hesitation to undertake it. It was a huge building needing a lot of maintenance and upkeep, and would people come? I had no idea.

So a few of us were just mulling it over in downtown Barre, when we noticed on some of the monuments in town—and as many of you know, the town motto of Barre is "Tranquil and Alert." Tranquil and alert. It's on the police cars. Tranquil and alert. So if ever we needed a sign...

That was the beginning, the beginning of IMS. We moved in in '76.

The next ten years, we were both really working hard at the center, and I and other teachers were following a very busy teaching schedule all over this country and in many places around the world—in Europe and Australia. There was a lot of teaching activity. It was as if we had just caught the wave in the West of interest in Buddhism. And so it unfolded so organically and so easily.

It all just happened.

But after ten years of this—and it was pretty full on—I began to feel in myself that there was something missing. And I didn't know what.

Sometimes new perspectives can happen in such unexpected ways. I was teaching a retreat in Australia and was watching the 1984 Winter Olympics. In those Olympics, the ice skating team of Torvill and Dean, two British skaters, got a perfect score in their program. They got a perfect ten. It was an amazing, just an amazing performance. And when I saw that, when I was watching that, something—I was just inspired by the possibility of perfection, of bringing anything to perfection, and what that means, and what kind of dedication that means.

So that inspired me to really look at my own life and what I felt was most important and what I would want to bring to perfection if I could. And I realized that I had this unfulfilled aspiration to really do more practice. I had been so busy teaching. I had been sitting every year, usually for a month, but it didn't feel enough.

And it was seeing Torvill and Dean on the ice—yes—that led me to Sayadaw U Pandita.

We had invited him to come in the fall of 1984 for his first visit here, a three-month course, very intensive, as we've told different stories about it. It was really intense. He's a very demanding teacher. At one point I told him that going to interviews with him was like going to the dentist—you know, that same feeling of trepidation going into the interview. So in his next talk he said, "Some yogis think that coming to see me is like going to the dentist."

At one point he had the idea that it would be good for my practice if I just sat, did a long sitting—sat until the pain came and then sit through the pain, get to the end of the pain. So I would sit until the pain. I would be sitting an hour and a half, two hours, two and a half hours, three hours, and then it started to hurt. And I'd be sitting and sitting and sitting and kind of gritting my teeth after a while. And I would always end up changing position. So I would go in and be reporting this to him. And at one point he said, "Don't you have any pride in being a man?" And I must confess that I didn't. It was actually the furthest thing from my mind.

At that time, there were some yogi rooms downstairs in the lower walking room at the far end. During that three-month retreat, I was staying in those rooms. And it was so intense, and there were times of such great difficulty. Remember, this was still in the time of the Cold War. So I'd be sitting, and it was really difficult. And I'd hear the planes come over, and I would think, "Ah! Maybe the Russians are going to bomb. And I'll be able to get up." It wasn't the most compassionate thought in the world for everyone else.

But over the next eight years, I did a lot of retreats with Sayadaw—in this country and in Burma and in Australia. And at a certain point, the relationship really got a lot easier, which was nice.

I remember going in to one interview, and he was still in a little bit of a fierce mode. I reported what was going on, and he just proceeded to point out all the defilements that were in my mind contained right in the report. There was desire and aversion and irritation, whatever it was, judgment. And he just made this list of defilements. And I just started to laugh.

That laugh was a really important moment, because until then I would have heard that and taken it as a judgment and then judged myself—"Oh, look at all these defilements. I'm such a terrible yogi." But somehow I had practiced enough at that point where he just pointed it out and it was the laugh of acknowledgment. Yeah, that's what's there.

And it was so interesting.

As soon as I got lighter with what was in my mind, Sayadaw U Pandita became incredibly lighter in the relationship. It's like he was just waiting for me to lighten up. And so it's really useful to see how we're the ones who are holding the self-judgment, and that it's not necessary.

Sitting with Sayadaw U Pandita really taught me a lot about right effort. Finding the balance slowly—this was over a long period of time—but finding the balance between not coasting on past experience, because we all develop to a certain extent and it's easy to just start coasting, especially if we're in a relatively easy place. So not to coast, to really push the edge, but also not to get caught up in expectation, not to get caught up in that striving mind. And I came to learn in working with Sayadaw that learning the art of right effort is really a lifetime practice. Really learning what right effort is for us at any particular time. When do we need to really push a little bit? When do we need to relax? When do we need to be courageous? When do we need to pull back? This is the art of meditation. This is what we continually need to be looking at.

Sayadaw U Pandita also at this time suggested that I and some of the other teachers who had been studying with him practice more intensively the Brahmaviharas. And that's where we really immersed ourselves in the practice of metta and the other Brahmaviharas. It was very interesting. As you've probably seen in your practice here, for me it took quite a while. At first I would be doing the phrases and doing the practice and not really feel much. And then as the feelings started coming, I would fall into another trap. I would be continually looking to see how I was doing. I'm doing the practice—oh, getting concentrated, oh, metta feelings getting stronger—not at all directed towards the other person. I would be saying the words, "May you be happy, may you be free," while thinking, "How am I doing?" So just to see that tendency of mind and slowly to let go of that.

This was a very valuable time for me in the practice because I began to see more clearly the interconnectedness between Vipassana mindfulness practice and the Brahmaviharas and metta. Instead of seeing them as two completely different things, I really saw how they supported and fed and nurtured each other.

There's one little teaching by Ram Dass's guru, Neem Karoli Baba, who was one of the great saints of India. He had this very pithy teaching. He said, "Do what you do, but don't throw anyone out of your heart." That basically was his teaching. Do whatever you do, but don't throw anyone out of your heart.

How do we accomplish this? We can really do it in two ways. We can do it through the meditation practice of metta and compassion and joy and equanimity, starting with ourselves and finally including everyone, so we don't throw anyone out of our heart. We include everyone. And we can do it from the other side. We can do it from the side of insight, the side of wisdom, when we understand that there is no one here. There is no self here to keep anybody out. The deeper our understanding of selflessness, the more complete is the inclusion of all beings. And so it just becomes very inspiring to see how the metta and the Vipassana work together.

There's another line from a Japanese poem, I think it's by Issa, where he says, "In the cherry blossom's shade, there's no such thing as a stranger." And to think of our practice as being that. In the cherry blossom's shade, there's no such thing as a stranger. We do it from the side of metta, becoming inclusive in that way. We do it from the side of wisdom—no one there to be separate.

So this took me to the early 90s, all of these years with Sayadaw U Pandita. But then again, I began to feel something's missing. There's some piece that doesn't yet feel fulfilled. And again, I didn't know what. These cycles themselves are so interesting to me—the cycles of when we're fully engaged in the practice and it feels so complete and so full, and then at a certain point, hmm, maybe there's a piece missing here.

And then that gets filled in and we practice another ten, fifteen years. Oh, maybe something else is missing. It points to the vastness of the Dharma and how we're always just at that edge of what's unknown. And so it's always finding new aspects to practice and understand.

One of my friends at that time, who's now teaching, his name is Lama Surya Das, had been practicing in the Tibetan tradition and had done two of the Tibetan three-year retreats. He invited Sharon and myself and some other friends to go meet some of his teachers in Nepal. So we went on this little tour, and it was my first introduction to the Dzogchen teachings in the Tibetan tradition. We met Tulku Urgyen, who was one of the great masters, and Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche.

Dzogchen, sometimes called the Natural Great Perfection, is the practice of learning how to recognize and rest in the open, empty nature of awareness. There's a phrase from the teachings which I've always liked a lot. When they talk about resting in the natural state of awareness, it says, "Rest your weary mind." That's just such a... yes. Let's rest our weary minds.

I was introduced to this practice, and at first I had the idea that it was completely different from Vipassana. As I was practicing, whenever I would find my mind just settling into the familiarity of my Vipassana practice, I would pull myself up short internally and say, "Okay, don't do Vipassana. You're doing Dzogchen." I would fixate on what I thought was just the awareness. Don't know anything else. Just be aware of awareness. That was the attitude in my mind about it. I became fixated on this fabricated state of mind that I was thinking was awareness, that I was taking to be the Natural Great Perfection. Meanwhile, I was in this prison of attachment and fixation.

But over time I saw that clearly this was not the Natural Great Perfection. I was getting tighter and tighter and tighter. Finally my mind began to relax a little bit, and I began to see and to feel how the two perspectives of Dzogchen and Vipassana really blend very well and support each other so easily. I didn't have to make this kind of rigid distinction in my mind.

At this time, there was a really big turning point for me in my practice. It's the one that fulfilled the peace that I had been looking for, that I didn't know I was looking for. And that happened on a two-month Dzogchen retreat that we were actually doing at a Zen monastery in upstate New York. This is American Dharma.

Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche was teaching, and he was giving teachings on bodhicitta. He was talking about relative bodhicitta being compassion, and ultimate or absolute bodhicitta being emptiness. Just in the course of the talk, something clicked in my mind. I was listening to the teachings, and things fell into place in the understanding that compassion and emptiness are not two different things—that compassion is the activity of emptiness.

This was huge for me. It was huge because I somehow had been keeping them separate. An expression of that understanding, which I think we may have mentioned in past weeks, is the teaching by Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He said, "When you recognize the empty nature of phenomena, the selfless nature, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless." Compassion is the activity of emptiness. It just brought things together in the most beautiful way.

This led me to a whole new understanding of the Bodhisattva vows, which are more commonly expressed in the Mahayana tradition, but I had been reading about them for years and years. Just for those of you who may not be familiar, there are many expressions of them, but one expression is: Beings are numberless, I vow to save them. Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them. Dharma gates are boundless, I vow to enter them. Buddha's way is unsurpassable, I vow to become it.

I had been reading and reflecting on these Bodhisattva vows for a long time.

Beings are numberless. I vow to save them. It seemed like a beautiful idea—and totally impossible. I just didn't see how in the world I could save all beings. It seemed beyond reach. So I simply put them aside. I thought, "Okay, it's a beautiful expression of an aspiration," but there wasn't much personal connection.

But then, with this understanding of bodhichitta—that compassion is the activity of emptiness—suddenly these vows made more sense to me. If we have these aspirations, or similar ones, and they're resting on the shoulders of a self, they're too big. How could a self ever fulfill these? But if we see that compassionate activity is just the working of selflessness, of emptiness—not based on or resting on any notion of self—it's simply the activity of Dharma, the activity of empty phenomena, the activity of wisdom. Then it becomes a way of life unfolding. It's not self-centered.

This was really a big turning point. I was happily settling into this new fulfillment of bringing bodhichitta—the whole heart space of bodhichitta—into the practice of vipassana, and to the extent I was doing a little Dzogchen practice, it all became one. Bodhichitta had filled out a missing piece for me.

But then a big spiritual crisis was suddenly looming on the horizon. I realized that my Burmese teachers and my Tibetan teachers were saying quite different things about the nature of reality, the nature of freedom, the nature of awakening. In the Burmese teachings, freedom—ultimate freedom—transcends even awareness. Awareness itself is seen as a conditioned phenomenon, and Nibbana, ultimate truth, transcends even awareness. While in the Tibetan Dzogchen teachings, and also in some of the Thai forest tradition, they have a different perspective where pure awareness is freedom.

Freedom transcends awareness. Freedom is awareness. These were great teachers, people I had tremendous respect for, people who I felt were realized—not speaking just philosophically or theoretically, but people who I felt had really experienced the truth—saying opposite things about what I felt to be most important in my life. This was a crisis. What to do?

I became plagued by the question—and really plagued: who's right? Because I thought, if what the Burmese teachers are saying is right, these Tibetan teachings must be wrong. And if the Tibetan teachings are right, these Burmese teachings must be wrong. My mind was tormenting me, going back and forth. I was trying to figure it out with my mind, trying to figure it out intellectually, thinking that if somehow I could just think it through, then I would know.

I was on this one two-month retreat. The first month of the retreat, my mind was completely engaged with this dilemma, and it was tormenting. I felt like my whole spiritual path depended on a resolution of this. It was a very, very vivid time.

The resolution finally came when I realized that I was asking the wrong question. The question "who's right?" was not the right one. So I reframed the question. Instead of trying to figure out who was right, I asked: Is there one Dharma of liberation that contains them both, that embraces them both?

This led me to two understandings. Just by reframing the question, all of a sudden I could drop out of that polarity. Is there one Dharma of liberation that embraces both points of view? This led me to two understandings.

The first understanding was truly important: with respect to the fully awakened mind, I didn't know. I simply didn't know. I knew what the Tibetan teachings said, I knew what the Burmese teachings said, but I myself didn't know. And that not knowing was tremendously freeing. I framed it as a little mantra for myself: "Who knows?" But it wasn't the "who knows" of confusion. It wasn't the "who knows" of bewilderment. It was the "who knows" of openness. I realized I don't know. Relax. Just settle back. Do the practice. And let it unfold. That was the first understanding, and it was so helpful.

The second understanding enabled me to settle back into a variety of practices. It was the realization that all the teachings from all the different sides and all the different traditions really are skillful means for liberating the mind, not statements of ultimate truth. I had been taking the teachings as being statements of ultimate truth. Of course, if another teaching says the opposite, there's going to be a problem. But if we take all teachings as skillful means for liberating the mind, then we simply have to ask the very pragmatic question: do they work? Even quite opposing teachings can each serve to liberate the mind.

There are a few images that express this, because I think it's a very important understanding to integrate into our practice. The famous example: when there's a finger pointing at the moon, what should we look at? It's useless to look at the finger. The finger is pointing to something. The teachings are pointing to something. Are we attached to the words, or are we actually looking at what they're pointing to?

The writer Wei Wu Wei had another little aphorism. He said, "Disciples, devotees—what are most of them doing? Worshipping the teapot instead of drinking the tea." It's so easy to worship the teapot, to get attached to the teapot. "My teapot is better than your teapot. It's older, it's more beautiful..." It's not the teapot. We want to be drinking the tea.

I framed this whole understanding for myself in a little phrase: metaphysics as skillful means. Instead of metaphysics as statements of ultimate truth, all the metaphysical systems and teachings become skillful means. So then instead of pitting one against the other, we simply ask: Is this teaching helping to free the mind from greed and hatred and delusion? Then it's helpful. Is this teaching helping to cultivate greater wisdom and love and compassion? The metaphysical underpinnings really don't matter. They are all skillful means, and that's the measure we need to apply.

This made it possible to open to, to learn from, to practice from many different angles and many different sides, because I could see them all as skillful means for liberating the heart. And all the traditions converge in an understanding of what it is that liberates the heart. The metaphysics may be very different. The concepts may be very different. But all the Buddhist traditions—and perhaps many other spiritual traditions as well—converge in the understanding that the heart is liberated through non-clinging. That is the nature of the free mind. The Buddha expressed it very clearly: nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine. This is not only an instruction for practice; it is a description of the liberated mind, the mind free of clinging.

So now when people ask me what I practice—do you practice Vipassana, do you practice Thai Buddhism, Burmese Buddhism, Dzogchen—I say: I practice non-clinging. Everything else is simply a skillful means to support us in that practice.

So this was the Dzogchen period. There's the early India period, there's the Sayadaw U Pandita period, and there's the Dzogchen period.

In recent years, I've been studying with some other Burmese sayadaws—Pa Auk Sayadaw and Sayadaw U Tejaniya. Again, it's just so interesting because they're quite different, with very different methods and emphases in practice. Yet in the practice of each of them, I see how they both support each other.

The work with concentration under Pa Auk Sayadaw supports the stability of awareness, the continuity of awareness that U Tejaniya emphasizes. And the checking of attitude that U Tejaniya stresses over and over again—"check the attitude in the mind," which we've been emphasizing a lot—helped me tremendously in the practice of concentration. Because as I was doing that practice and watching my attitude, I noticed a little striving. When I checked the attitude, the mind relaxed. It concentrated more easily. So everything fits together. That's the great beauty of the Dharma.

Last year I was on sabbatical for a year, not teaching. I did a long retreat, a five-month retreat. Right in the middle, I had a few sittings—and you probably know from your time here, sometimes you just have a couple of sittings and everything falls into place. Well, I had a few sittings like that where all of these different teachings—the Vipassana teachings and my understanding of Dzogchen and Zen and Tejaniya and the concentration practice—all just fell into this beautiful whole. W-H-O-L-E. Maybe it would have been better if it had fallen into a hole!

It all began with a reflection on the Buddha's Enlightenment song. You know the famous house builder quote? After his enlightenment, the tradition says he uttered this in his heart—not necessarily out loud, but this is what came to his mind. I wrote it down. It says: "O house builder, house builder of self, you have now been seen. You will build no house again. The rafters are broken, the ridge pole shattered. My mind has attained the unconditioned. Achieved is the end of craving."

So that came to mind. We've talked about this a little bit during the retreat—the power of that statement: "Achieved is the end of craving." What an amazingly simple and direct expression of the enlightened mind. This is what the Buddha is saying directly after his attainment of Buddhahood. It's very unambiguous: attained is the unconditioned, achieved is the end of craving.

In those sittings on retreat, something shifted for me. Instead of taking that to be some far-off attainment that maybe someday, through practice, we'll come to the end of craving, I saw that it was really a practice in the moment. Moment to moment, we can be watching, we can be seeing: in this moment, is the mind craving? Is it reaching out? Is it grasping? Or not? Craving... not craving.

We can begin to experience at least a taste of the freedom the Buddha talked about, even if it's just for a moment. We may have a long way to go until we've achieved the final end of craving, but in the moment we can really have that taste. I would suggest for all of us in our practice to hold that understanding very deeply and be watching moment to moment: what is the heart, the heart-mind, doing? Is there that movement of craving toward the object, or not?

Then I reflected on the Dzogchen teachings about the nature of mind, the nature of awareness. And it's really saying the same thing. There are teachings in the Dzogchen tradition that say, "Awareness means the wisdom mind free of clinging." It says, "If you don't cling, whatever arises is naturally freed." It's the same thing. So we could say, in that tradition, *rigpa*—the term used for the nature of mind, the empty nature of awareness—is the mind of no craving, the mind of no clinging. That's what we come back to.

In Vipassana, we stop clinging. We train ourselves to let go of clinging through a refined perception of the three characteristics. We see the impermanence, the unreliability, the selflessness. We see there's nothing to cling to, and so the mind drops back. On the Dzogchen side, or in some of the Thai tradition, we recognize...

The nature of that awareness that's not clinging—and then we practice stabilizing it. We're simply approaching it from two different sides to accomplish the same thing.

This speaks again to that image of ice and water that I mentioned last week. Craving, clinging is ice. Water is the mind of not clinging, unobstructed. So we just watch, moment after moment.

But as I said, sometimes we think it's water, we think it's not clinging, but it's not. This can be a subtle fixation—what I call "slush mind." Subtle fixation, subtle attachment, subtle identification with awareness itself.

This is a very subtle place to really begin to see. Even as everything is flowing, unobstructed—all the objects, thoughts and sensations, the breath, sounds, the whole world is flowing, empty of self—that last corner of the mind, the last holdout of fixation, is the identification we have with the knowing, with the awareness. "Well, that's who I am." So we reify the awareness.

In the last few minutes of this talk, I want to suggest ways of cutting through this identification with awareness. It's very interesting and very subtle.

A well-known contemporary Tibetan master, Trungpa Rinpoche, said: "The failure to recognize the mind's true nature, the empty nature of mind, occurs because the empty aspect of the mind's nature is not recognized due to the appearance of its lucid aspect."

What does this mean? It means that as we're looking at the nature of mind, the knowing aspect, the cognizing aspect, is much more apparent than the empty aspect. So that's what the mind fixates on. That's what we identify with. The awareness aspect obscures the empty aspect.

So what to do about this? There are a few little teachings that point directly to this understanding. I feel this is just the piece that can really open up something for us. And it all begins in the way of practice where we're looking at our minds. We're looking at the mind, looking for the mind—and not finding anything. When we look for our minds: "Oh, there it is!" No. There's nothing to find.

As one teacher said, the not finding anything when we look for the mind—that moment of not finding anything is the finding. Pay attention to the experience in that moment of looking for the mind and not finding. What is that moment like?

Here is a little poem from the Chinese, translated by Thomas Merton, called "Starlight and Non-Being." Starlight is going off in search of non-being. We are starlight. That's us—in search of non-being.

So she kept her gaze fixed on the deep void. All day long she looked and she saw nothing. She listened, but she heard nothing. She reached out to grasp and grasped nothing.

Then Starlight exclaimed at last, "This is it! This is the furthest yet. Who can reach it?"

Remember—looking for non-being. "And if on top of all this, non-being is, who can understand it?"

Looking for the mind, looking for non-being. Nothing to find, nothing to grasp, nothing to see, nothing to hear. We look for the mind. That moment of not finding—pay attention to that moment.

One more little teaching, in case you missed it on this one. This is the last chance this time around.

Keep in mind that with all these teachings, sometimes we really do have a sudden recognition, and sometimes not. Sometimes it may even be confusing—what is this all about? But these are all seeds. I've had so many times when I'd be sitting and something would come to mind that I had heard weeks or months or years ago. When the conditions are right, that little piece comes up and is understood. So you don't have to be concerned. If it's meaningful to you now, fine. If it's not meaningful, let it be a seed.

Sometimes this recognition of the empty nature of awareness comes just like that, and sometimes it's after years and years of struggle. There's a famous exchange between Bodhidharma, who is said to have brought Buddhism from India to China, and the one who would become his first disciple, Huike.

Bodhidharma is sitting in his cave—he was one of these fierce old Zen masters—facing a wall for seven years. And Huike, who has been searching and searching, struggling and suffering, sits outside the cave beseeching Bodhidharma to teach him. He was really suffering.

Finally, Bodhidharma comes out and says, "What's the problem?"

Huike says, "I've been suffering so much. Please give me the teachings. Please pacify my mind."

Bodhidharma says, "Show me your mind."

Huike says, "I've looked for it everywhere and can't find it."

And Bodhidharma says, "There—it's already pacified."

The not finding is the finding. Understanding the empty nature, it's already pacified. Nothing more to do. Except remember.

It was all in this last period of retreat, just in this last year, that all of these pieces came together—from the Buddha's teaching on the Four Noble Truths and the end of craving being the end of suffering, from the Dzogchen point of view of the empty nature of mind, from the Zen point of view and the teachings on no-mind. It all comes together. The Dharma is this multifaceted jewel, and we can learn from so many different sides and different aspects.

I'd like to close with some advice from another Tibetan teacher, Dzigar Kongtrul. He said: "The potential for realization is universal and present for all of us. True benefit will come from your own efforts and realization. For your efforts to bring benefit, you must take your life into your own hands and examine your mind and experience. From this point of view, nobody could be kinder to you than yourself. Nobody could have a greater effect on you or actually do more for you than yourself."

The Buddha said, "I have shown you the path of liberation. Now liberation depends on you."

This is really true. If you don't take your life into your own hands, not even the Buddhas can make a difference. It is up to you.

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